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キャバルリイ
3
GA文庫

Illustrations

Novel Illustrations

「この戦いで私の限界を試してやる」
《深海の魔女》
黒鉄珠雫
《雷切》
東堂刀華

Prologue: Shizuku's Challenge

Part 1

Kurogane Shizuku recalled them, the memories of her childhood.

She was forgiven no matter what she did. She was forgiven even when she beat up other children. She was forgiven even when she stole the toys of other children.

Why? It was all because she displayed her worth as a blazer since she was young.

「I am very sorry Shizuku-chan. Hey, you apologize, too!」

Having been beaten by his parent, the kid, who was her relative, bowed.

"I'm sorry."

The apologetic words were filled with chagrin.

Shizuku always glared at that, bored.

The kids who twist their righteousness before power. The adults who forgive wrongdoings before power. Every single one of them was worthless. Only people like those were around Shizuku. They bow before the strong, and give lip service filled with hollow gratitude and good will.

Dirty.

She hated beings called humans because of that. And, she was fed up with herself for also being such a worthless living thing. She was fed up and continued to vent the frustration on the weak. Because whenever she heard the cries of hated human beings she felt a bit

relieved.

But, there was a boy, just a single boy, who didn't forgive Shizuku.

Slap

That boy, Shizuku's brother Kurogane Ikki, told Shizuku who was making other kids cry—

"You should not bully the weak."

Shizuku couldn't comprehend what had been done to her. Because even her parents had never scolded her nor hit her. Not being able to comprehend anything, her cheek, which was hit, was hot, and tears crumbled down.

Seeing the crying figure of Shizuku, the adults angrily shouted "Hurry up and apologize!" to Ikki who had hit Shizuku.

The adults started hitting Ikki who didn't abide by their order to apologize. But, even so, Ikki didn't bow until the end. Because he didn't have any reason to bow his head down.

…Such a human being was a first for Shizuku. There was no one up until now who had stood up and pointed wrongdoings as evil. At the time she cried because she was shocked at having been hit all of the sudden, but in reality, she was happy. She was always searching for someone like that. It didn't matter if they didn't pamper her. It didn't matter if they were hard on her. She just wanted someone who she could respect as a human being.

Thus Shizuku decided in her heart on that day. That she would follow this person, because if she did so, she was sure that she would be able to become someone different from the worthless adults who she had been seeing until now.

—But,

At that time, I knew nothing.

The severity of the situation surrounding her brother.

Nothing of it—

Part 2

"First year Kurogane Shizuku-san, it's time for your match, please step forward."

Shizuku slowly opened her eyes upon the announcement.

There was a dark passage before her. It extended all the way to the entry gate of the ground where today's match was supposed to be held. Shizuku walked down the passage without any hesitation, and she resumed recalling the past.

I found out about Onii-sama's difficult position after he had left the house.

Not even a single person of the Kurogane household tried to find her brother. It was like he was not even there from the start. At that time Shizuku finally realized that thing her brother always hid behind his gentle smile. She realized and hated it. Everything about Kurogane which cornered her brother till that point.

And she was resolved. If no one was going to love her brother, then she would just love him all the more, including others' part.

It won't do like this. It won't do if all she ever did was to depend on him, and follow him around. She had to become an equal, and give him her support or else she won't be able to hold on to her brother. Or else, she'll end up leaving her brother in solitude again.

Thus, she needed to get stronger.

With certainty, her brother would shine in this world eventually. Shizuku knew his strength more than anyone else, and that's why she knew it. Shizuku desperately worked hard to become someone who would be able to stand by his side as an equal when the time came. And, she acquired strength until she got the excellent

evaluation of a rank-B.

But, it's still not enough. Her brother aimed for the summit of Seven-Stars. Her current level was not enough to accompany him there.

「Well then, I will begin introducing the competitors of today's second match! From the blue gate, she is the sister of the popular knight, whom everyone in this arena should know, contender Kurogane Ikki. She is the runner up freshmen of this year standing right after the 'Crimson Princess'! Her match results so far are ten wins out of ten matches! The superiority or inferiority of attribute doesn't matter to her! Will she sink her opponent with exceptional magic control today once again? The first year nicknamed 'Lorelei', competitor Kurogane Shizuku!!!」

Shizuku came out of the dark passage and stepped into the ground filled with cheers. But, the unceasing cheers felt distant. Naturally, it was because Shizuku was only concentrating on the one before her.

「And from the red gate, the student council president, and also the strongest of this school. She advanced to the semifinals as a second year student last year in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. Having lost to last year's Seven Stars Sword King, Moroboshi of Bunkyoku Academy, she was not able to take the summit of the Seven Stars. However, she has once again returned to the battlefield, where competitors fight over the summit, along with her still-invincible trump card that has been more refined since last year! Impossible to dodge before that speed! Impossible to parry that swiftness! Will the golden flash today, once again, cut her enemy within the blink of an eye!? The strongest lightning user Hagun boasts of—the third year nicknamed 'Raikiri', contender Toudou Touka!!!」

Toudou Touka.

At a distance approximately twenty meters away, the strongest knight of Hagun academy stepped into the ring while swaying her long chestnut-colored hair.

Shizuku was certain after seeing her.

…I see. She is on a whole different level.

She could understand after coming face to face with her. The air hurts. The hair all over her body twitched. Shizuku could feel herself sweating upon the sharpness of her piercing gaze. The very nature of the atmosphere surrounding her differed from every other opponent she had faced in the selection matches until now.

This opponent was strong. Obviously ranks above her.

—But, that's why… Shizuku was excited.

Finally.

She had been eagerly waiting for a chance like this ever since coming to this school. A fight where her feelings would be tested.

She was within the best four in last year's Seven Stars Sword Art Festival. She is a worthy opponent.

In that case, she'd test it. Just how much did she really love her brother in these past five years. All kinds of feelings, and her love for him—

With this fight, I'll test my limit!

And, as if to respond to Shizuku's feelings—

"Then, let the twelfth match begin!!!"

The buzzer was sounded marking the beginning of the battle.

Chapter 1: Lorelei VS. Raikiri

Part 1

Lorelei VS Raikiri.

Both of them were the strongest student class B-Rank knights.

The contest between two of the most powerful figures in Hagun welcomed an unexpected start.

「Wh, what is going on-? Both of them refuse to step forward!」

The kodachi named ＜Yoishigure＞ possessed a silver blade.

The Japanese sword ＜Narukami＞ sheathed in a black scabbard.

They both circled around the ring, keeping their distance the same, while holding their devices.

Even though an entire minute has passed since the match started, they still had not clashed their swords even once.

---The ground was covered in tension to the point of being painful.

The audience, who had come to watch a high quality fight, held their breaths without any exceptions and watched the ring.

"Neither of the two are trying to make the first move."

The fiery red haired girl, standing beside Ikki, called Stella Vermillion muttered in a stiff voice.

"They're checking each other's moves out while glaring from a distance."

It was the tall beauty, Arisuin Nagi who answered to Stella's mutter.

"Both of them are B-Rank knights possessing the power of a Seven Star Sword King. That student council president and of course Shizuku, too, have the means to attack from one end of the ring to the other. Both of them are within each other's attack range. The one to make a careless move will be defeated."

"To add one more thing to what Alice said, Shizuku doesn't want to be the one to make the first move because Toudou-san has the strongest cross range weapon."

"…Ikki, is that the trump card the commentator talked about?"

"Yes, it is neither exaggeration nor a lie. It's the noble art that became Toudou-san's epithet because of its immense strength and awe striking nature. To elaborate, it is the ultra-electromagnetic battoujutsu ＜Raikiri＞."

She creates a powerful magnetic field with her thunder ability around the blade and scabbard of ＜Narukami＞, hanging on her waist, and then shoots the blade out.

The strike of that battō has the tremendous power and speed to even cut through a lightning bolt.

That's no longer a strike that could be parried with the body of a human.

Thus it's a certain kill technique.

"Every single official match where she used ＜Raikiri＞ ended in Toudou-san's victory. Once it's released it will defeat the enemy without fail. It's literally a trump card."

"Huh, but Ikki, wasn't she in the best four last year? Then, wouldn't it mean the knight who defeated her surpassed it?"

"No."

Ikki denied, swinging his head.

"The current Seven Star Sword King, Moroboshi- kun is a spear user. I saw a video of the match, he was doing his best, throughout the

match, to stay out of ＜Raikiri＞'s range. In other words, even the Seven Star Sword King was afraid of her ＜Raikiri＞. There has been no one till now who has been able to breakthrough Toudou-san's cross range. Every single one who stepped into that territory was, without any exception, cut down by her faster than a lightning slash, and of course, Shizuku knows that, too."

"…That's why, she doesn't make a move."

"Yes, Shizuku will be on defense throughout this match. Though, originally, Shizuku specializes in long range magic battles. There is no one who will step into a disadvantageous distance by their own will."

That's why, Shizuku was going to wait.

For the moment when her opponent will attack.

Within the frozen time.

"But… once Toudou-san makes a move things will develop quickly."

At the exact moment Ikki said that—Touka moved!

Part 2

Swiftly bending her knees, she leaned forward, and leaped.

Within an instant she reached top speed.

Their distance was twenty meters.

Touka could cover that distance within a blink of an eye.

But the 《Witch of the Deep Sea》 wasn't someone who would easily allow that!

It was obvious because she had been waiting.

For the moment when Touka would move with all of her strength!

"Freeze—*Toudo Heigen*[1]!"

Along with those words, Shizuku's footing froze.

That ice froze the entirety of the ring and extended to the walls faster than Touka.

And what would happen if one were to run with all their might on such a foothold?

Of course, they'll slip.

Thus Touka would have to temporarily decrease her speed.

But, to force her in that situation was Shizuku's plan.

Shizuku immediately made her next move.

Noble art 《Water Bullet》.

A water cannonball, which could take away the enemy's breath by clinging to his/her face once it touches it (them), was shot from 《Yoishigure》's tip.

Three consecutive shots. It was impossible to dodge those three shots on this frozen plain. That was common sense.

However, her opponent was a monster who lived in the immediate vicinity of Seven Stars' summit.

To her surprise, Touka didn't decrease her speed on the frozen ground.

She saw through Shizuku's plan to slow her down in an instant.

Thus, rather than stopping she further accelerated by sliding on the floor.

She slipped through the space of the three cannonballs like sewing through them, and skillfully dodged 《Water Bullet》.

And, while spinning around like a top by using the frozen floor, she released 《Narukami》, which was on her waist, aiming at Shizuku who was still far away.

Instantly, from the drawn blade a crescent shaped lightning slash was released towards Shizuku's neck.

After seeing through Shizuku's plan, she immediately performed a long range counter after dodging her attacks.

Touka was visualizing her evasion and counterattacking the moment she saw 《Water Bullet》.

There wasn't any enemy till now who saw through Shizuku so fast and precisely.

But---- that was within Shizuku's prediction.

The moment before the lightning slash cut Shizuku.

A water wall with a breadth of thirty meters from the ground came between Shizuku and the slash.

It was the noble art 《Shouha-Suiren》. It was Shizuku's impenetrable defensive technique that didnt't allow any kind of bullets or lightning attacks to pass.

Of course, Shizuku didn't think 《Raikiri》 would let her have her own way.

Obviously, because she was the fourth strongest apprentice knight in Japan.

She was sure to attack from long distance.

Having read that, Shizuku had taken precaution(s).

The lightning slash was able to blast away a part of the water wall, but it didn't penetrate it.

She had safely dealt with Touka's counter attack.

—That thought existed for brief moment.

"—Nn."

The instant Touka saw that her attack didn't pass through the water wall, she let out two, three, ten more lightning slashes without even waiting for a second.

She unleashed lightning attacks like a machine gun.

What frighteningly violent attacks these were.

There didn't exist any valor like before when she saw through Shizuku's plan. This was just an overpowering, brute force spasm.

But, it was all part of her plan.

Touka, at this point, had already understood the advantage she had against Shizuku.

It was the time required to execute techniques.

Shizuku needed to pay attention to every single molecule of water, removing any impurities to create pure water that had an attribute of insulation, to dodge the lightning. It was an extremely nerve wracking, delicate operation.

In comparison, Touka only needed to clad her slashes with lightning and send them flying towards Shizuku. It didn't really require a delicate procedure.

Of course, a gap in their speed appeared.

Touka realized that advantage with a single exchange.

That cornering her with a barrage of instantaneous lightning strikes was the most difficult development for Shizuku.

And that was a correct deduction.

Shizuku would be unable to undo the barrier if she was under the constant bombardment.

Shizuku had no choice but to protect herself with 《Shouha-Suiren》 from the barrage of lightning blades.

But, even just a single attack from Touka was heavy.

The hot lightning blade was certainly, without fail, chipping away Shizuku's defense.

And after several tens of attacks, the machine gun like barrage of lightning finally blown away the last of Shizuku's defense.

Touka immediately proceeded to swing 《Narukami》, intending to finish it up with one last lightning attack.

—It was at that moment.

".....n!"

Touka's movement stopped.

Why?

The reason was at her foothold.

Touka's feet were caught up by something.

They were arms made out of water coming forth from the frozen ground.

The water arms froze the instant they caught Touka, effectively sewing her to the ground.

At the same time a shadow was nearing Touka from above, whose movement have been completely sealed.

What is it?

It was too late when Touka took her gaze off from Shizuku and looked above her head. What she saw was a scene where an enormous pillar of ice was falling down at a terrifying speed from a human's absolute blind spot, and it had come so close to her it could almost touch her nose.

—Everything went as Shizuku had planned it out.

If Touka was to go on offense by quickly seeing through her plan, then Shizuku was to counter it by seeing through Touka's plan profoundly.

Shizuku let Touka think that she had the advantage of speed.

She caused her to get the wrong idea that all she could do was be defensive and protect herself like a turtle.

And, behind that facade, she imbued her mana into the ground and made the arms constrain her. On the other side, she used the water that was vaporized by Touka's lightning attacks to create a mass of ice to crush her.

She simultaneously performed three different complex mana operations.

A feat average blazers wouldn't be able perform, but Shizuku could do it.

Her ability to control mana was worthy of being rank-A, because it was at the highest level among humanity, even surpassing Stella's.

Instantaneously, the fallen mass of ice split the ring along with Touka.

Its power was tremendous. The crack from the destruction extended till the audience stands.

It was that powerful of an attack.

And at the center of that destruction was a tombstone made of ice.

There was no way she could still be standing after receiving this attack.

The result of the match was obvious to everyone. It was supposed to be.

Despite that, Shizuku felt it.

--That even a single atom of that almost painful atmosphere has not disappeared.

As though to ascertain her understanding, the mass of ice burst opened from both sides like a blooming flower.

《Raikiri》 stood at the center of that, unharmed.

"……" "……"

Both of them attacked, and defended to the point where the ground was partially destroyed, but still none of the two have scored a point.

They were evenly matched.

The fight of two rank-B knights had returned to the starting point, both glaring at each other.

Part 3

『A…… amazing!!!!!!!!!! What a high level match of offence and defense! I, despite being a commentator, was not able to let out a single word!』

The commentator who was captivated by their fight, shouted like she finally remembered her position.

And with that the audience, finally freed from the pressure that rendered them breathless, raised surprised voices.

「Wh, what heck are they……!? Are they really humans like us……!?」

「Amazing, President is really amazing after all!」

「No, no, I already knew President was amazing! After all, she is among the best four! But, what's up with that first year who is equally holding up!?」

「In that moment, she defended, counterattacked, pulled off a bluff, and used her trump card… how many cards did she play in that short amount of time!?」

「However, President countered them all!」

「Both of them are monsters. So, this is the power of a B-Rank……!」

『Their fight has stirred a commotion in the stadium! However, it's no surprise! Power, technique, tactics; everything shown in this match is not at the level of an interscholastic competition! It wouldn't be weird if either of them becomes the Seven Stars Sword King, since they have such power! On top of that, both of them are without scratches even after such a violent battle! As they say

"Diamonds cut diamonds!" Just who will fate choose as the winner today!?」

"Shizuku, she is doing good……!"

"…I knew she was strong, but to this extent… even I am surprised!"

Like the commentators and others, Stella and Arisuin, seeing Shizuku holding her own game expressed their admiration.

Since her opponent was the strongest knight in Hagun.

And, she was the girl who was in the best four in last year's Seven Stars Sword Art Festival.

Against such an opponent, Shizuku was fighting equally.

In other words, it meant that Shizuku's power was equal to the monsters living at the summit of Seven Stars.

"At this rate, she might really win……!" said Stella, with expectations.

Despite quarreling with her all the time, Stella did not hate Shizuku.

There were things they understood, precisely because they loved the same man.

That's why Stella was happy with this development from the bottom of her heart.

Shizuku was fighting well enough against a high rank lightning user.

Thus, the outcome of this match was unclear. There was a large possibility of something unexpected happening.

But, standing beside the two filled with hope, there was one—

Kurogane Ikki was the only one looking towards the ring, grimly.

(……*Equal, huh.*)

Part 4

"Well, Kanata, those two are certainly evenly matched."

"Yes, Vice President, it does seem the case."

Two people of the student council lead by Touka Toudou, Utakata Misogi and Kanata Toutokubara, were watching the match from above the red gate located opposite the blue gate where Ikki's group was at.

"Really, this year's first-years are amazing. Everyone's so strong, I'd have to give up. If they acted up, the ones who'd have to come stop them would be us, huh?"

"Hahaha. Aren't you crying out in joy? The point is we can graduate with relief."

Complaining with a refined voice like a songbird's twitter, Kanata gazed again at the opponent who was fighting equally with Touka from beneath the rim of her hat.

"However, I was truly surprised that she can compete with our princess this far."

"It's true. She really isn't the tiniest bit inferior. That there's anyone like this among the first-years besides Kurogane-kun and Stella-chan, it's truly amazing."

Utakata also acknowledged that. And more than acknowledging it, he cheerfully smiled with cool composure.

"—But that is still, in the end, the wrong range."

Right. It was the reason Ikki had a grim expression. It was the one visible reality of the current match. Touka had taken absolute

control over close range. For one thing, it could be said that cutting through this was impossible. In other words, Shizuku Kurogane's way to win was completely in commanding long range. In that case… it was wrong to call them evenly matched. The scene of offense and defense just now was, as far as Shizuku was concerned, about seven to three that she had to come out on top. In spite of that, she couldn't do any kind of effective damage to Touka. That is, if the current match was restricted to offense and defense, it was even, but if one expanded his outlook and carefully studied the whole fight… since some time ago, a clear superiority had emerged between Lorelei and Raikiri.

Furthermore—

"Furthermore, Touka isn't serious yet."

Shizuku was a B-Rank knight, a water user who could boast of almost A-Rank Magic Control. For this kind of outstanding talent, there was something at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival which couldn't be found elsewhere by chance. That was hard-won experience. For that reason, Touka didn't purposely attack unreasonably, and accepted the long range combat that Shizuku wanted. In order to study the top water user's offense.

"Fighting before the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, Touka is probably delighted, huh?"

"Yes. But still, it's about time for the studying to wrap up. The time span of today's match is extremely strict. Because as president of the student council, she prefers to not fall behind schedule."

Part 5

Exactly as Kanata had said, something unusual was happening in the ring. Under Touka's feet, the icy surface created by Frozen Field began to steam. With the Joules of energy created by a lightning user's manipulation of vast electric power, Touka was overriding *Frozen Field*. And raising *Narukami*, she aimed its point at Shizuku.

Shizuku certainly felt a heart-piercing blood thirst from the clearly shining sword-point, and her expression stiffened. However, the reason for Shizuku's expression stiffening wasn't only that pressure.

I don't understand.

While Shizuku was surrounding Touka with a spell, she had been captured by doubt. It was the previous response to the offense and defense from not long ago that was giving her an irremovable doubt.

How was she able to respond to my surprise attack?

Lorelei's magic control far eclipsed that of Raikiri. Compared to Stella the A-Rank knight, Raikiri's magic control would be even more inferior to Shizuku's. For that reason, Shizuku had absolute confidence in her concealment tactic. It was impossible for her opponent to discern what kind of technique she was bringing out. Furthermore, humans have an absolute blind spot above their heads. Even the people who could react to indications from behind them could not sense things above their heads. That was the mechanism of the creatures called humans. But in spite of that, Touka noticed it as if it was nothing out of the ordinary, and sliced in two that tombstone of ice.

I'm seeing something… something I've never seen before.

The instant she thought over what that was….

A sudden wind roared, and Shizuku saw Touka's figure brandishing *Narukami* before her eyes.

Shizuku goggled at that sight, and almost screamed. It was understandable, because in a blink, the enemy who had to be tens of meters away had gotten close enough to extend a hand and touch her with their sword.

"Guh—!"

But even if she was surprised, she didn't freeze up. Shizuku threw her body backward without breaking her fall or any thought, and evaded the sword flash that was swung in a horizontal line. And then like that she turned her body, and placed her left hand on the ground. From the palm of that left hand, high pressure water exploded outward, pushing her body far from Touka.

It was simply a composed judgment that didn't stop at evasion. However, that was Shizuku generally using her reason and somehow decisively acting with composure. Right now, her head was half-panicking.

The reason, I don't understand it!

She couldn't understand what was occurring. Her gaze could not have slipped for even a moment. Despite that, Touka had shortened a distance some tens of meters without a sound or sign, and abruptly appeared before her eyes.

「Oh, contender Kurogane! She just made a dangerous evasion just now! Even though she was able to cope with contender Toudou's movement, what the heck happened just now!? It looks like she's somehow lost concentration, but…!」

I've lost concentration?

To the voice of the live broadcaster, Shizuku knit her brows in

puzzlement. It was impossible for her to lose concentration in the middle of the match. However, the words of the live broadcaster made what looked like that apparent to everyone else. That she had overlooked Raikiri, who just now made an attack.

Even though that kind of thing couldn't have happened.

In any case, it had been unfavorable just now. She had to concentrate so that it'll never happened again. Shizuku told herself so strongly, and gathered her awareness into her eyes.

The next instant, her eyes that swung downward saw the blade of *Narukami* approaching.

"…Uu!?"

It cut deeply into Shizuku's clothing, and she had no time to dodge or think.

「Aaaaahhh! Contender Kurogane Shizuku took a hit from Contender Toudou's sword just now! And it was quite deep! Could this be a fatal wound!?」

However, the instant that everyone thought the match was decided, Shizuku's body suddenly turned pale, turned to ordinary water, and spilled onto the ring. And the real Shizuku was already behind Touka, standing quite a large distance away in the arena.

「I-It was some kind of water clone! Contender Kurogane has avoided Raikiri's sword splendidly… no!」

The live broadcaster's voice suddenly cut short. Why? Because the scarlet color flowing across Shizuku's left hand was visible.

「Blood is dripping from her left hand! She wasn't able to dodge perfectly! In the end, Contender Kurogane was struck! The first one to get in a damaging hit in this match is 'Raikiri', Contender Touka Toudou!」

"Kuh…!"

I didn't see it at all.

Shizuku moaned as she held the light wound on her left arm. She didn't know what kind of mechanism had been used. What kind of method was used to move invisibly, Shizuku completely could not comprehend it. However, the scarlet flowing down her left hand told her only a single certain truth.

I can't catch the movements of this enemy…!

Right. In this instant, it was obvious to anyone's eyes that the even struggle between these two people was broken.

Part 6

Once the struggle for supremacy was broken, in the situation afterward, Touka pressed forward just like that. Shizuku started a one-sided defensive battle, and ran around the ring single-mindedly. However, the pace of the pursuing Raikiri was swift, and her own reaction was slowed by the burden generated from her evasive movements. She was gradually becoming tired, and now if she was pressed she'd be driven to exhaustion repeatedly to the degree of collapsing.

「What's going on? Lorelei and Raikiri seemed to be even matched in the beginning, but now Lorelei is running around, and it seems that's the best she can do. Why in the world has the balance up to now become so different!?」

The bewildered live broadcaster hadn't grasped that Shizuku had lost sight of Touka. Because of that, she couldn't comprehend why the match up to now had progressed so one-sidedly. However, there was one truth everyone at this battlefield could understand together. That was—who would be the winner of this fight.

「Even though it's fine for her to surrender already….」

「Guess this was a heavy opponent for a first-year after all.」

「Even though I thought there was a possibility she'd be able to compete….」

「Well what? Gonna leave?」

「Yeah, I figure the match is already decided. She's really strong, that Prez is.」

The venue whose atmosphere was cooling; the enthusiasm from the start was nowhere to be found. That was how it was. If one thought about it, no matter how exceptional she was, she was still a first-year. Was there a reason for Hagun's best knight to lose to that kind of opponent? There had been an off-the-mark enthusiasm, but that kind of apathetic atmosphere now drifted through the venue.

In the middle of that, Stella asked Ikki in a moaning voice.

"…Hey Ikki. How is Shizuku doing?"

"How, meaning?"

"I can tell by looking. It's obvious that her response to her opponent's movements worsened all of a sudden."

"It's just as Stella-chan says. Even though the President is moving normally, it looks as if she can't see it."

Arisuin also felt that there was a problem with Shizuku's movements. And of course, Ikki did too. But Ikki could already see a few more things than the other two.

"…It's exactly like that, probably."

"Eh?"

"Shizuku really can't see her. I've also seen something like this once before."

It was that time before his debut battle, when he met the Yaksha Princess Nene Saikyou at the reception desk.

"That time, Saikyou-sensei got right in front of me in an instant. Even though I didn't let her out of my line of sight for even a moment, she got to my chest before I knew it. Right now, Raikiri is probably using the same body technique, I think."

"Ahaha. As expected of Kuro-bou. You noticed it after all, huh?"

A voice descended from an angle above. Ikki turned his eyes in that direction, where a bewitching petite woman dressed in a kimono and an imposing woman clad in a suit were descending the bowl-shaped stadium's stairway.

"Hey there~. It's been a while ♪."

"Saikyou-sensei, and Madam Director. The two of you together, I wonder if something's going on?"

"What, she just called out because she saw you guys, not because there's a reason."

The board chairman, Kurono Shinguuji, answered Arisuin's question. These two only came to see the duel between fellow B-Ranks in an ordinary Selection Battle. They only greeted them because Ikki's group was having an interesting conversation.

"…Hey, Nene-sensei. The thing that Ikki noticed, is what he's saying correct?"

Saikyou-sensei confirmed Stella's question with a nod.

"Yep. That is an ancient Japanese martial arts technique called Trackless Step that merges breath control and footwork. Or something like that—"

"…Eh?"

In an instant. Saikyou who had to be at least five meters away from Stella reappeared very close, and—raised Stella's plump breasts from below while rubbing them.

"Eek!?"

"Oh, this kind of feeling? Well, no milk's coming out. Yet it's super soft~♪"

"Kyaaaaa! Wh-Wh-What are you doing!?"

"I was wondering if rubbing yours would make mine grow."

"If you want to grow then go rub your own!"

"I don't have anything to rub, IDIOT!"

"You're getting angry at the victim!?"

Ignoring the two noisy people, Kurono asked something of Ikki.

"Kurogane. Someone like you has already seen through how Trackless Step works, right?"

To that inquiry, he nodded.

"Somewhat. If you tell me to do the same thing, I could probably do it."

"Hey Ikki, what is this Trackless Step?"

"Let's see, humans are nothing more than animals, and like a machine they can't process all the tiny details that they see and hear, and the brain certainly can't consciously recognize all of those sights and sounds. After all, if they processed and analyzed everything they see and hear, the brain will burn out. Therefore, the human brain will toss low-priority information into the unconscious, and abdicate recognizing them in order to ease the load on itself. This thing called Trackless Step is a martial arts technique that applies peculiar breath control and footwork to slip its user's existence into the opponent's unconsciousness. As a result, even though Shizuku can still see Toudou-san, she has become unable to recognize that fact. Even though the brain and the eye can capture Toudou-san's movements, they can't be processed because the consciousness is classifying them as unnecessary information, to the degree that a life-threatening danger can approach to little more than a blink away.

"Spot on. You understood it well."

Kurono praised him as if in admiration, because there were no faults in Ikki's answer that divulged the mysterious mechanism that was assaulting Shizuku.

Right. There was only unconsciousness within.

The opponent was making everything about herself imperceptible by shifting her breath and body a half-step, and by sliding into that interval, she had dodged the awareness locking onto her. That was the mechanism behind the old-style footwork Trackless Step.

"Because I've already seen that body technique once."

Moreover, Touka's Trackless Step had great flaws compared to Saikyou's. Because of that, Ikki was able to see through the mechanism.

"But I didn't think that there was a student who could do the same thing as the Yaksha Princess."

"Well, it's natural to be able to do the same thing, since Nene and Toudou both study under the same knight. Trackless Step was originally the technique that was that knight's strong point."

"Is that how it is? By the way, who was that teacher?"

"Torajirou Nangou."

"Nangou, the 'God of War'…!?"

To the revealed name, Ikki showed a shocked expression.

God of War—Torajirou Nangou. The great hero Ryouma Kurogane's lifelong rival, the elder knight who was on active service while being over ninety years old. He is a living legend who people talked about without end.

"It's like you saw him at a senior's lodge one time, and begged him for training thereafter."

"Mu. Hold on a second, Kuu-chan! I've never thought of that geezer as master even once!"

"What are you being shy about? Those clogs are probably also something copied from that person."

"Y-Y-You're wrong! I bought these from mail order to help ease my constipation!"

"Sandals for changing how you walk, huh…."

While patting Saikyou's long-sleeved kimono noisily, Kurono leaked out her honest opinion that "that person is as unfrank about her feelings as ever" about Saikyou who for some reason was becoming irritated, then once again turned her gaze toward Ikki.

"Well even so, if you can see the mechanism so clearly to that extent, it should be understandable to you. Trackless Step can't be broken by your little sister."

"Eh—!"

The declaration of those words, they were the truth of Shizuku's hopeless defeat. It was Stella and Arisuin who raised surprised voices upon hearing them.

But Ikki, though he had a bitter expression, didn't show surprise. Why? Because he had reached that conclusion a long time ago.

"…Really, Ikki? There's no way for her to break Trackless Step!?"

"No, there's a way to break Trackless Step with your own body. It's enough to just voluntarily shift your attention to the unconscious. However, that's easier said than done."

For example, imagine that there was a man thrusting a gun in front of one's eyes. And that man is obviously showing hostility, and pulling the trigger with his finger. In that kind of situation, just about anyone would have his eyes glued to the muzzle. It would be natural, because it was one's life being threatened. Under that kind of situation, would anyone take heed of the man's earring? Would anyone care who the earring's maker was? There was no way anyone would care. No one would consciously recognize inconsequential information, probably. However, in order to break this Trackless Step, one has to take his eyes from the muzzle and focus on the earring beneath that serious situation. That was the task of shifting one's attention onto the unconscious.

"Shizuku is right now exactly in an exchange for her life. In this situation where her opponent is intentionally slipping from her

consciousness, it's training in its own way, and if she can't gain free control over/of her own body and consciousness, she won't be able to do it."

For example, if this was someone like Ikki or Stella, even that was probably possible. Because these two people, from the process of learning martial arts, had established almost complete control of their bodies. However, Shizuku was different. She was the best when it came to magic control, but as for controlling her physical body, she was a novice. Therefore, rather than thinking it was an oversight, she would try and concentrate. As a consequence, her field of vision would narrow, and the darkness of her unconscious would deepen. It would give birth to a perfect vicious circle.

"Honestly… it's very severe for Shizuku, I think."

"That can't be…!"

Of course even Ikki didn't want to imagine Shizuku's defeat. But it was sad that Shizuku and Touka, these two B-Rank knights, had too much of a difference. Whatever additional effort Shizuku tried to start making, she simply couldn't ever make an effective attack on Touka.

And that was with her forte of long range. In a fight without the evenness that comes from distance, the match would become complicated. It would probably be impossible to have a victory in a situation where she's completely pinned down.. Without a doubt, she was being maneuvered into a fatal distance. And that was Raikiri's range.

"…Maybe, there's a possibility that Shizuku has a trump card she can use to deal with Raikiri in close range. But if not…."

To that, Ikki didn't say so daringly. However even if he didn't say it, Stella could understand the words that might follow.

It was mysterious. As far as Stella was concerned, Shizuku was a rival in love. A person who could be nothing more than an obstacle, but still—she understood Shizuku. That right now, what kind of feelings Shizuku had in this fight. How strong the thoughts that

Shizuku was dealing with in her chest during this fight. Because she loved the same man, she understood how those feelings hurt.

Because of that—

"Shizuku—! Do your best—!"

It wasn't something she could put into a single word. Despite knowing that, Stella couldn't contain that shout.

Part 7

Stella's loud and beautiful voice reverberated through the assembly hall that had lost its enthusiasm. Naturally, it also entered Shizuku's ears. This voice, from a rival in love she knew well, hit her earlobes giving a cry that sincerely wished for Shizuku's victory. To that cry, Shizuku clenched her fist hard enough to block the bleeding.

I'm not exactly happy about being cheered on by someone like you!

Raising her eyebrows, Shizuku pretended to be tough. Feeling it inside her heart, in order to ignore a terribly itchy difficultly-shaped emotion. If she accepted that, it would give a mood of having a permanent change to the relationship between that girl and herself.

But however much she ignored it, Stella's voice had certainly shifted a feeling in Shizuku's heart. That was the competitive spirit.

Stella-san will definitely go to the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

She was simply the one A-Rank knight in Hagun. Right now she was someone higher ranked than Shizuku, and Raikiri who Shizuku was confronting. She didn't think it would be likely that Stella would stumble during selections. Furthermore, Ikki who took a victory over that Stella would probably advance again, into the national stage. Shizuku understood her brother's strength more than anyone. For that reason, she had no doubts about this truth.

Therefore—she couldn't be the only one to lose here.

I'll also win, and advance. With Onii-sama, with everyone together, to the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival—!

The moment she became aware of that, the fighting spirit of Shizuku who had lost strength out of hopeless inferiority surged upward. While healing her wounded body, she held her head high

and glared at the enemy before her eyes.

「Oh, contender Kurogane who has been one-sidedly defending hasn't given up the fight! She's given her body some healing, and has taken a stance to keep on going! Could it be she has found some way to win!?」

She hadn't found any such thing. But she had found determination.

…Touka's approach, she couldn't follow it. What kind of mechanism it was, Shizuku didn't understand it, but she realized enough that she already detested only that. In that case—she couldn't keep defending. More than the fact that she couldn't see her opponent's moves, the tactic of spraining the first step with long range was failing. Huddling up at a distance would only make the situation worse and worse. Therefore, reserving herself for survival would naturally only distract her offensive.

Her opponent was Raikiri. Hagun's highest knight who held an invincible single slash in close range. But if there was no other way to take the victory—

I'll capture it! That invincible close range!

Shizuku prepared herself that way, and put her strength into her grasp on *Yoishigure*. But knowing nothing about that determination, Touka ruthlessly, mercilessly, again penetrated the thin space of Shizuku's consciousness with Trackless Step—

In that instant, Shizuku moved! She stabbed *Yoishigure* into the frozen ground, and yelled out.

"*Byakuya Kekkai!!!*"[2]

Together with the words of that incantation, the ice of the Frozen Field changed from solid to vapor in an instant, and became a smokescreen-like deep white mist that swallowed the entire field!

Shizuku had changed her way of thinking. If one couldn't see in this direction anyway, it'd be fine to make everything invisible.

Therefore in the face of the Joules of heat, the Frozen Field that wasn't serving its function was already vaporized, dispersing as a thick fog that one couldn't even see a meter into.

In the middle of this magic mist, the only one who could move freely was its practitioner Shizuku. Without being able to see, this mist was the same as a part of Shizuku's body. What was there? Who was there? She could feel all of it. And that perception had undoubtedly captured the position of Touka who had been brought to a standstill and lacked a technique to establish the middle of the fog.

Shizuku immediately circled around Touka's back.

"*Hisuijin.*"[3]

Acting with the voice, the water in the atmosphere gathered on *Yoishigure's* edge, and soon took the form of a large Japanese sword. That was a blade of high-pressure circulating water current(s). That was to say, it had the strength of water that wears through stone drip by drip. If it was with a high-pressure current, water could change into a tool that can cut apart even metal like butter. In the first place, for the entire Earth, it could be said that water had sculpted its shape. There was nothing on its surface that hadn't been cut apart by water. Shizuku, with outstanding Magic Control, had compressed that power of Mother Nature into the shape of her blade—

Let's do it—!"

And broke into a run toward Touka. Was it a reckless suicidal attack? No, she had a conviction of victory in her heart. The overhead surprise attack from the beginning, she didn't understand the reason that had been seen through. However, using *Narukami* to try to deal with Hisuijin the same way as that time, it would be impossible. Why? However much one possessed a famous sword or cutting power, water was fluid. *Narukami*, which had a solid form, could not stop such a blow. Hisuijin would pass through *Narukami* that came to block it, and cut down Touka's body.

Shizuku could see that vision. For that reason, she charged into

Raikiri's distance with conviction held in her heart, and—

"Eh…."

In that moment, Shizuku saw it. Within the mist. With a pair of eyes trained on Shizuku who couldn't possibly be perceived, it was the sight of Touka's form that had taken a stance to quick-draw her sword. A visible flash of lightning violently moved at the black scabbard where *Narukami* had been restored.

She knew. Shizuku saw and remembered the image many times over. This technique that releases a blinding light. That was a trump card that cuts through all resistance in a single flash—!

"—Raikiri."

Spraying plasma, burning the world to white. An overwhelming heat released in an instant.

Shizuku, who initiated the clash, couldn't stop. She was swinging Hisuijin downward with her full strength. Raikiri who had released her power, with only that speed, erased that sword of circulating current in an instant.

As if everything up to now had been like that. Shizuku Kurogane's wish—had been cut down with one stroke.

Part 8

The moment that Raikiri, who was clad in plasma, followed through, a blade that transcended the speed of sound blasted through the surrounding atmosphere. The same windstorm that burst open swept over Toudou, and blew apart Byakuya Kekkai's mist. That aftermath reached even the audience seats, and grated the cracked assembly hall. The force of the atmosphere was already to the point people couldn't even stay up.

But in the middle of it, Ikki didn't close his eyes even one time. Within the raging windstorm, staring down on the ring beneath his eyes—to the end, without averting his gaze, …he saw Shizuku Kurogane's fallen form with his own eyes.

「A flash of lightning! A blade descended! At the same time, the referee has cross his arms! The match is over!!! Contender Kurogane has shown us a brave fight but even so the obstacle of last year's best four was insurmountable! The one who conquered the life-and-death struggle with a fellow B-Rank is our student council president, 'Raikiri' Touka Toudou!!!」

The live broadcaster announced the winner's name, and lowered the curtain on the match.

Putting up a good fight—certainly the offense and defense in the beginning far transcended the level of students. However, the natural contents of the match was probably Shizuku's complete defeat. Because however it happened, she was never going to be able to touch Touka.

But—even so….

"Hey, Ikki."

"I get it, Alice. I was watching properly."

Answering Arisuin's voice that way, Ikki stared at a speck in the ring. What he was staring at was the right hand of the fallen Shizuku.

That right hand was gripping Raikiri's leg.

Right, it was certainly a complete defeat. However—

"She was splendid. Shizuku."

It was probably Shizuku herself that felt more than anyone the difference between her power and that of another. Despite that, she didn't concede to the end, and continued to fight.

…She's gotten stronger, huh?

That small girl, who always followed him with tiny steps—around this time today, there was no instant of Ikki not feeling four years worth of progress. And—

Ikki stared at the back on which chestnut-colored hair waved and was leaving the ring.

…As I thought, she's strong.

At that time, Shizuku had definitely not made a reckless suicidal challenge. The Byakuya Kekkai that snatched away her opponent's field of vision. In the middle of the Noble Art that Shizuku possessed, the strongest cutting ability that she boasted of, *Hisuijin*. She, by means of her entire strength, seriously carried out a strategy against Raikiri. She probably could see the vision of her own victory. But to seize it, she cut forth head-on. How much did she try her best, even thinking about the highest one effort, the existence that heads toward that distant higher hypothesis.

Ikki, who fought the "Sword Eater" Kuraudo Kurashiki, knew this. The extent that the people who resided at the top of the Seven Stars, not a single one of the people who resided at that domain was ordinary. They were superhumans who surpassed common measurements.

For that reason, Ikki thought—how much effort would it take to ascend to that summit?

Touka Toudou, Raikiri…. It looks like I'll definitely cross swords with her, huh?

Part 9

After the advent of the flash that burned away her field of vision, there was a deep darkness of despair. From that gloom, Shizuku slowly woke up. Raising heavy eyelids, she saw the blurry world come into focus. What jumped into her eyes was the white ceiling of a spotless medical office, and—

"You've woken up, haven't you Shizuku?"

—the face of the roommate she recognized.

"…Alice."

Shizuku slowly raised her body half-way from the bed. When she looked, she saw that it wasn't only Arisuin here. Behind him, the figures of her brother Ikki Kurogane and Stella Vermillion were here as well. From that sight—

Ah, I see.

Shizuku comprehended her own defeat.

"I lost, didn't I?"

At those words coughed and muttered, a heavy silence fell.

Don't worry about it, cheer up. The people who were part of this world of matches and fights knew how bleak those words would be. In this world, there were no such words to give for the defeated.

"…Shizuku, umm, you know?"

"I'm sorry."

The words that Stella tried to begin to say in the middle of the

painful silence, Shizuku cut them to pieces.

"A little while… just for a little while, won't you leave me alone? I'm worn out today."

Shizuku covered her face and begged everyone. Right now, she didn't want to hear anything, and didn't want to see anything. …She just wanted to be alone.

"I understand. …Let's go, Stella."

"…Yeah."

Ikki sympathized with Shizuku's feelings, and lead everyone out of the medical office immediately. She was grateful. The regret over her defeat that ran through her heart was already rising through her throat. Her body trembling miserably from bitterness, she didn't want her brother, Stella, or anyone to see it. Because Shizuku was a proud little girl.

That was what she asked for, but—

"…Why are you still here?"

For some reason, Arisuin had remained in the room with a gentle smile on his face.

"Well, I wonder why?"

"I must have said to leave me alone."

"Yep. I heard you."

"So—!"

In the instant she vented violent words, Arisuin embraced Shizuku.

Eh.…"

"…Ali…ce?"

"You really fought hard, didn't you?"

Arisuin conveyed a calm tone close to the ears of Shizuku who had been surprised by the sudden embrace.

"Your brother, he was watching Shizuku all the way to the end. He said that you were splendid."

And while stroking her silver hair as if brushing it—

"And to me, Shizuku is neither someone who wants to protect nor someone who doesn't want to lose. Therefore… you don't have to pretend to be tough, you know."

That was her limit. To the gentle words that had been announced, to the embrace wrapped around her, the sobs that were rising through her throat spilled out. After it spilled out once, more overflowed like a dam breaking.

Frustrating.

Frustrating. Frustrating.

Frustrating. Frustrating. Frustrating!

The wish that didn't come true. The dream she didn't reach. Those vestiges tormented Shizuku. The frustration that she couldn't put into words, Shizuku screamed them out as she clung to Arisuin's chest. She put in enough strength to cut with her nails, but Arisuin didn't loosen his embrace. Because the partner of this proud little girl who was spitting out her bitterness, he knew that he was the only one. Therefore Arisuin kept hugging her small body until Shizuku's sobbing ended.

Part 10

"Shizuku seemed vexed."

Heading down the corridor from the medical office to the dormitory, Stella coughed.

"…It's understandable. The road to the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival has essentially been closed to her, probably."

Some time ago, Ikki had been informed by Oreki firsthand that these Selection Battles would advance only six names as representatives, and these slots would be filled by the undefeated. Since they would aim for the entire country, these fights would never permit a defeat.

"But Shizuku has nothing to be embarrassed about."

Ikki remembered Shizuku's right hand that seized Touka's ankle. The willpower that she showed at the end, it was indescribably magnificent.

"It's a rigid fight that doesn't allow even one loss, right?"

"Yeah. But… it's not just someone else's problem."

Everyone fought under the same rules. Shizuku, Ikki, Stella—and everyone else. None of the people who aimed for the summit of the Seven Stars were allowed even one defeat. That was the rule laid out by the new board chairman, Kurono Shinguuji. A cliff that filtered out contenders for the sake of creating a Seven Stars Sword King from Hagun. Even breaking down and reuniting the stars of high-ranking companions, to select the strongest single person. Because at the end of the day, only one person can take the summit of the Seven Stars.

"It's already the finishing line of the Selection Battles. Even we have to focus our energies more than ever, right?"

"I won't lose, you know."

Ikki turned his gaze to Stella nearby, who made that clear declaration. And Stella also looked up at Ikki again. With pupils that held the blazing and sparkling flames of a strong fighting spirit.

"I will absolutely not lose. Because I'll fight and win against Ikki this time at the finals of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival."

To that expression of strong will and affection, Ikki felt a happiness rising inside his chest. The promise they exchanged that night. He knew he wasn't the only one who looked forward to its fulfillment.

"…I think the same, after all. I definitely won't lose either."

"Hehe. Of course. I won't allow you to disappear in the middle♪"

Stella cheerfully spread a sweet smile over her whole face at Ikki's reply. At that smiling face, Ikki's cheeks relaxed. Recently, this girl had become more and more unbearably lovely. The more he knew her, the closer he got to her, the more he loved this girl. Her flower-like fragrance, her slightly high temperature—all of it was lovely. And because he wanted to fall even more in love with that girl, he would maintain a higher motivation than what he had held up to now. He would push himself higher than where he was now. For the sake of making himself worthy of the strongest rival who was there beside him, of the girl who was his beloved sweetheart. His meeting with her, it was an irreplaceable fortune as far as Ikki was concerned.

"Well, so that we don't lose, shall we do some training?"

"That's fine. Speaking honestly, after watching Shizuku's match, my body has been throbbing."

"Haha. That's so like Stella. Then let's hurry and go."

Saying so, Ikki checked to see that nobody else was in the corridor, then took Stella's hand and entwined their fingers. When he did so,

Stella also squeezed Ikki's hand in return. Since they had taken a step forward as sweethearts at the pool, little by little they had grown used to mutual skinship. Recently, when they went to places out of the public eye, one of them would spontaneously grasp the other's hand. Tightly entwining fingers, recognizing the partner's temperature and presence, Ikki and Stella both loved doing those things.

Well, of course their favorite kind of skinship was kissing. …In that state, for the love between the two, the matter that had begun at that pool had certainly shortened the distance between the two sweethearts. That could certainly be called progress.

However—to tell the truth, Stella felt a touch unsatisfied with the current situation. Or maybe unsatisfied was not quite the right way to say it. She wanted to get closer and closer—to seek Ikki as a woman would. To shrink and shrink the distance between herself and Ikki, that desire was growing strong.

At night. In particular, when they exchanged kisses before sleeping. It was the worst at the moment their lips separated. Like yesterday, she gave a strange moaning sound when their lips separated that had surprised Ikki.

That was so embarrassing….

Having been surprised by a sweet sound she hadn't imagined she could make leaking from her own lips, she immediately leaped into bed and covered her head with her futon, but nonetheless there was a time before the fire that had lit inside her body went out.

Are my sexual desires so strong, I wonder…

Just remembering it had somehow made her very embarrassed. In the first place, she hadn't sought a place to get an answer. Because for Stella, there was her position as the second princess of the Vermillion Empire. However, at the same time Stella and Ikki were both mature adults beyond the age of fifteen. (That Blazers come of age at fifteen was a standard shared by all countries participating in the League of Mage-Knight Nations.) In other words, they were both… adults who could consent to marriage. As adults who've

come of age, they had the privilege to fall in love, of course.

What if, by some chance… Ikki sought that….

If he looked her directly in the eyes, placed his hands on her shoulders, and sought that—if it was at this moment, what answer might she choose? Would she take the official stance of an imperial princess? Or instead her own personal feelings?

If it was Stella from a little while ago, she'd probably give some excuse or other and refuse Ikki. But right now, which would it be?

She asked herself, but no answer came.

But, if Ikki truly wanted and sought for her—

…I would—

"What's wrong, Stella? Your face is really red?"

"Fue!? Ah, it's nothing!"

"If it's nothing, your face wouldn't get that red, you know. I wonder if you might have a cold. Maybe a little fever."

With a worried expression, Ikki drew near her forehead to check her temperature. To that kindness, Stella raised her feelings in a scream.

D-D-Don't get near my face right now—!

"I-I-I'm really fine! Really! So you can't get so close—!"

She somehow forced Ikki back, while astounded by her own lack of chastity. To think that she was considering such misconduct inside the school building before the sun had even set—

Such a thing was bad.

Such a thing is prohibited before going to bed.

Meaning it was okay in bed? Stella ignored the retort sent from her own heart and calmed her feelings down.

Suddenly, it was at that time. From the corner in front of their eyes, with a *nuu* sound, a strange thing came into view.

Was it a human shadow? Thinking that, the two of them separated their hands in a panic. Like they expressed not long ago, Ikki had a social position, not to mention Stella. If they were to be sweethearts, the world would be considerably taken aback, and that interaction would become heavily pressured. Because of that, until the frantic period of students in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival ends, it was their current plan to leave the relationship between the two of them hidden.

However… what appeared wasn't a person. It was a monster in the shape of a pure white crooked rectangle.

"Heave… heave…!"

That monster, if one looked carefully, one could tell it was a bundle of papers stacked into a pillar. Somebody was carrying the pile of stacked paper with both hands. It was hard to tell who was doing it though, because the mountain of paper stretched so high it was concealing his or her face. But if one looked toward the legs, it seemed to be a female student.

"I-It looks kind of dangerous."

"It does, doesn't it? We should probably give her a hand."

Making up his mind, Ikki raised his voice at the female student.

"Umm, if you'd like, should I help you carry that?"

"Eh!?"

However, the female student was surprised by his abrupt voice, and her body stiffened. Because of that, her right foot caught the back of her left foot, and—

"Eeeeek!"

"Whoa!?"

And dropped the stack of paper on Ikki.

"Sheesh, what are you two doing…."

"Oh no no! I-I'm sorry! I didn't think that there were people in front of me!"

"No, I'm also sorry for startling you by calling out suddenly."

The three of them fell to their knees and together gathered the dispersed stack of papers. And then after collecting them to some extent, Ikki turned his attention back to the female student, and—

Before his eyes, there was a butt moving left and right.

"Bu!"

"Ohh, glasses… where are my glasses?"

Perhaps at the time she fell down, her skirt had been flipped up. But the female student hadn't realized it herself, and while coughing, she was on all fours groping around the floor by hand. In doing so, she swayed and fluttered a somewhat large and voluptuous butt.

"Wha, hey you! Your skirt! Your skirt is flipped up!"

"Eh? Noooooooooo!!!"

At Stella's warning, the female student finally realized she was waving her uncovered butt in front of Ikki face, and hurriedly returned her skirt to its normal position.

"I-I'm so sorry! I've shown you such an unthinkably indecent thing…!"

"Err, no… ahaha."

"Ikki, did you see it?"

"…If I said I didn't, would you believe me?"

"Do you think I would?"

"Guess I don't need to ask. …Hmm?"

As he sighed, something came into Ikki's field of view. It was a pair of round glasses with extremely thick lenses.

Ah, was this what she was looking for a moment ago?

Guessing the reason the female student had been on all fours and shaking her butt, Ikki picked those glasses up and presented it to her.

"Hey, the thing you were looking for, isn't this it?"

"Ah, that's it! Thank you so much! I can't see anything without them…."

The female student turned toward Ikki, and gratefully accepted the glasses. And that was when Ikki and Stella saw the female student's face properly for the first time—

"Eh?"

"Wha!?"

—and froze in surprise with a single question.

"Y-You're—"

Why? Because this female student—this girl with her chestnut-colored hair in a braid was—

"Raikiri—Touka Toudou!?"

Undoubtedly, it was the one who defeated Shizuku with overwhelming power, the one who was Hagun's strongest knight.

"Eh? Ah, yes? That's right, but what about it?"

Part 11

"Ah, President! Hey there—!"

"Good afternoon, Mishima-san."

"Student President! Congratulations on today's match!"

"Thank you for your support, Sayama-san."

"President Toudou, good afternoon! Thank you for helping me search for my purse that other time! I'm really sorry about having you accompany me the entire day."

"Please don't worry about it, Itagaki-san. Besides, finding it was thanks to Uta-kun, and I wasn't helpful at all…. Ah, but please take care not to lost it from now on, okay?"

As they advanced meter by meter, students of various school years and both male and female gender greeted Touka, and Touka answered them individually by name. Ikki and Stella were holding the documents she had been carrying sometime ago, and were watching that scene while walking several steps behind her.

"People idolize Touka-san, don't they?"

Suddenly, Stella spoke her thoughts. To that, Touka was cheerfully smiling as if amused.

"I only know the things that are only natural for a student council president, after all. Leaving that, I must thank the two of you. Not just for gathering the documents for me, but also helping to carry them…."

"No, no. It was originally a quantity that was tiring to carry."

"Ahaha… I was a little overconfident and tried to carry them all in one go. In the end, I shouldn't try to cut corners, I guess. I'm reflecting on it."

Touka stuck out her tongue bashfully. That gesture was extremely charming, unthinkable for the same person who had previously used the power of a fierce god to put Shizuku down.

"But… I was surprised. I saw Stella-san's face in the newspaper before so I knew her, but for you to be the rumored Ikki Kurogane-san. …It was a rather awkward timing for us to meet face to face, I think."

Awkward timing, it was probably because Shizuku was Ikki's sister. To those words, Ikki responded by shaking his head a little.

"…It was a match. Shizuku brought out everything of herself and fought splendidly. And you accepted that challenge head-to-head, and answered it sincerely. That's all it was for me. I'm very grateful that you accepted my sister's desire, and I bear no grudge."

Those were Ikki's true, undeceiving thoughts. But—

"I'm of the same mind, but I do have one thing I'm concerned about."

Going along with Ikki's words, Stella looked at Touka with a gaze that carried a slightly dangerous mood. She had something she needed to ask Touka no matter what. That was—

"Touka-san. We saw the situation just a moment ago, when you had the kind of eyesight that lets you see almost nothing without wearing glasses, but you didn't put on glasses during the match, right? Why was that?"

Indeed, why did Touka, whose eyesight was so bad, take off her glasses during the match?

"…Can it be, you were going easy on her?"

"N-No, dat ain't true!"

"Eh?"

"Eh? …Ah. …Th-That's not true at all~"

Was she agitated by Stella's question? A huge accent had appeared just now. With her cheeks reddened, Touka's confused attempt to gloss over it was already rather too late. But nevertheless, Touka cleared her throat a bit and returned her tone to normal.

"How should I put it, it's instead the opposite. Because Shizuku-san was an opponent who couldn't be dealt with by ordinary means, there was no way I could accept her challenge while wearing my glasses. If I didn't improve my perception's accuracy by cutting off my eyesight, matching an opponent of Shizuku-san's class would've been very difficult.

"Perception, you say… what do you mean by that?"

"Me, I become able to sense the subtle signals of my opponent's body moving by cutting off my eyesight. Such a thing is a practical application of the ability to use lightning, you know?"

As Touka said. Humans are living machines. Their movements are based on autonomic transmission of signals coming entirely from the brain. Being able to perceive those signals was extremely beneficial.

The opponent's movements from the signals running down his nerves,
The opponent's line of sight from the signals controlling his eye muscles,
The opponent's mental status from the signals in his inter-cranial matter,
One could understand all of them quite distinctly.

"That sort of information, it's the opponent's true and naked feelings that can't be falsified. The opponent's state of mind. How the opponent is planning to act next. There are many things I understand beyond what the eye is limited to seeing in the opponent in practice. And if I grasp those things, reading and analyzing what my opponent is thinking becomes very simple. Thus

I can see through both traps and surprise attacks."

"…I see. That's how Touka-san was able to avoid Shizuku's surprise attack, then?"

Touka nodded "yes" at Stella's words.

"That's my Noble Art, *Reverse Sight*. I suppose it resembles Worst One-san's Perfect Vision, yes? Although if Worst One-san's Perfect Vision is the fruit of discernment, mine is an ordinary cunning. … Well, that's how it is, but it's not like I never ease up on an opponent, you know?"

"Yeah… I get that well, sorry, it was an odd suspicion."

"No, no. Hahaha."

"You seem somehow delighted… right?"

"Yes, Stella-san was worried about her friend—was what I was thinking."

Stella's cheeks grew red as if a fire had been lit by those words.

"Wha! T-That person and I aren't friends at all!"

"Oh? Is that how it is?"

"No, I think they're on very good terms."

"I-Ikki, even you! Ugh—I don't care anymore!"

Suddenly in a bad mood, Stella turned her eyes away from Ikki and quickened her steps, walking ahead by herself.

…I wonder if she actually knows where the student council office is?

She probably, no definitely has no clue. She was waiting for them after having turned the next corner, most likely. So Ikki didn't chase after Stella, and asked Touka instead.

"By the way, is that alright?"

"Is what?"

"Well, telling us about your own ability. There aren't many matches left in the Selection Battle Finals, but there's still a high likelihood we'll become adversaries."

"It's not really a concern. I've leaked the mechanism of Reverse Sight, but—it's not like I'll lose or anything."

In an instant, as if Ikki had been struck by a lightning bolt, he felt a numbing fighting spirit from the top of his head to his feet. Touka, who had been cheerfully giving the calm smile of an older girl a moment ago. From the narrowed eyes of that smile, a savage light like a sparkling knife was visible. It was unmistakable proof that this girl was Raikiri. Holding absolute confidence in her own strength, and craving battle with people even stronger than herself. One who was the same type as Ikki or Stella—with eyes that burned with self-confidence and ambition.

…*Ha ha.*

That was what Ikki thought on seeing it. That this girl and himself, they could surely become very good friends. And more strongly than that. Some time in the future—he wanted to try and fight this girl.

Part 12

After walking for about five minutes, Ikki and the others finally arrived in front of the student council office.

"Whew. Got here at last. The student council room is unexpectedly far, huh?"

"Thank you, the both of you. You must surely come in and have some tea, please. Just yesterday, Toutokubara-san supplied us with very delicious tea leaves."

"Then I'll accept your kindness. How about you, Stella?"

"Me too. My throat is cracking."

"Then please come inside—"

As Touka said so, opening the student council office door, and taking a step inside to guide the other two—

"Bgyu!"

Touka's toe caught on to something heavy, and she pitched forward and fell dramatically. Her head descended all the way, and her butt presented itself to Ikki and Stella, exposing her underwear yet again. Since some time ago, Touka's skirt hadn't done its job at all.

"…Hey Ikki. Shouldn't this person's underwear earn a fee from an ad sponsor?"

"There was no such arrangement."

"Owwowow…. Wha was dat?"

While speaking with an accent at the unexpected trap, Touka got up

and took a good look at the student council room. And she turned white as a sheet.

"Wh-What the heck is this—!!!"

Touka raised a cry.

The student council room had bookshelf to bookshelf of books, miscellaneous objects withdrawn here and there, absolutely everything there scattered about. And in the middle of that chaotic room, all the student council staff members besides Touka were present. The secretary, Ikazuchi Saijou, was transcribing meeting records with truly skillfully written letters. The treasurer, Kanata Toutokubara, was pouring tea for him. But the vice president who was the type to do his work diligently, Utakata Misogi, was enthusiastically amusing himself with video games, and Renren Tomaru was watching the game screen with great interest and exercising with a resistance band while wearing nothing more than an athlete's T-shirt and a pair of panties.

"Oh~? The Prez is back—. Welcome—"

"Ahaha☆ Touka is such a klutz. Did you get turned around again?"

Renren and Utakata greeted Touka when they noticed that Touka had entered the room. Towards those two, Touka's eyebrows lifted mechanically, and—

"Geeze~! Tomaru-san! I'm always telling ya if ya gonna use

dumbbells then put 'em back in a proper place! Iz dangerous, ya know! And Uta-kun, if ya gonna read manga then straighten da bookshelves properly afterward! Ya always take them out and leave 'em like that! I mean why'z the place this cluttered when I only went away for one day to prep for my match!?

She shouted with a raised voice.

"Pff, why's Prez deciding that we were the ones to make it cluttered? That might be a false accusation, you know!"

"The only one who works out in the student council room is Tomaru-san, and only you and Uta-kun read manga and leave it out!"

"Well no… I somehow suddenly wanted to read through all of Rur●Ken and Dragon B●ll and Sla● Dunk[4] in one go, and going back and forth to take each volume from the bookshelf was troublesome, so I just grabbed all of them together, you know? And when I read them, I got nostalgic and suddenly wanted to play some SNES, so I turned over the room and dug through it little by little. Ah, but while Touka was gone, Ikazuchi and Kanata were working properly, so everything's okay!"

"What's with making that triumphant look while leaving everything to other people!? It makes me angry! Sheesh, you people are always, always—"

"President, it's not the place and there's no reason to get excited, and we do have guests as well."

"—Oh!"

Touka, who had forgotten herself in her wrath at the disaster area the room had become, looked over her shoulder at the entrance. There, Stella and Ikki stood with small smiles, gazing at the wretched state of the student council room that had become like a hoarder's house overflowing with garbage.

"O-Ohoho. Won't you please wait just a bit~?"

Touka, while unsteadily plastering a forced smile on her paled face,

pushed the two of them back into the corridor, and slammed the door shut.

"Look here! Everyone help clean this place up! Uta-kun, stop playing games already!"

"Wa! W-Wait a second, Touka! I haven't saved since yesterday, wait, waaaaa! My Hagurin[5]!!!"

"I'm always telling you, only an hour a day for games! Sheesh, I let my eyes off of you and this is what happens! And Tomaru-san, are you still in that state!? There are boys in the student council too, so please put on a skirt or something!"

"Eh? But it's so hot because Prez destroyed the air conditioner—"

"Since electrical appliances get short-circuited whenever the President touches them."

"I-I'm very sorry about that, but that has nothing to do with wearing underwear in the student council office! It disturbs public morals! It's an unbecoming display for a student council member who should be a role model for the students!"

"Even though Prez is the chief of napping around in her underwear—"

"Ahaha☆ It's because Touka didn't used to have opponents to keep her in shape, so she was endlessly idle, right?"

"M-M-My private life has nothing to do with this! Anyway, please clean up quickly! If you don't clean the place up, I'll throw all of it away!"

"Whoa, I get it! I get it!"

"Hurry! Hurry!"

Thump thump thump thump. With a noise as if someone was moving house, a clattering and rattling sound came from the student council office's shaking window. While that riotous noise was audible from the corridor—

"Touka-san somehow seems like a mother, huh?"

"…The student council has its own troubles, I think."

Ikki and Stella both felt an affectionate mood toward Touka. In the end they had been driven out before setting down the documents they'd been carrying, but they weren't going to complain.

They then waited in vain for a few minutes, until the student council office door finally opened.

"C'mon, c'mon… ah, sorry for the wait. Please come in…."

Touka peeked a disheartened face through, and invited the two of them inside.

"Ah, yes. Please forgive the intrusion…."

While wondering if it was a mistake to accept the invitation to have tea, Ikki entered the student council room with Stella.

And he was astonished.

The place had become beautiful as if the room had been completely replaced by an entirely different one. The books that had been scattered everywhere were now all put away in the bookshelf, and the floor had been polished to the point that his face was reflecting off of it. The cleanliness and hidden antique style of the refined furnishings, it gave the sense that the space was a room from a Western castle. It was quite admirable that they could clean up this much in just a few minutes.

However, Ikki whose eyes were sharp had noticed it.

Umm, wait a sec. The closet over there looks like it's bulging in a weird way.

And in front of that door, Saijou was planted there looking like a Jizou statue[6], which might mean—

…Yep, let's pretend I didn't see that.

He gently ignored the lid sealing that hellish pot, and Ikki and Stella accepted that recommendation and sat down on the sofa in the middle of the room, gathering around the same table as the student council members.

After that, Renren with her light brown skin sat toward them and gave a friendly, cheerful smile and spoke.

"Kurogane-kun, it's been a while. It looks like you haven't had any trouble winning continuously after beating me, huh?"

"Yes, I've been pressing on somehow."

Following that exchange, Kanata greeted Stella with a gentle smile. Beneath the brim of her hat, blue eyes peeked out for the first time.

"It's been a while for us too, Stella-san. You met me at the restaurant, yes?"

"Yes. Though I didn't think that the day would come that I'd be called to this room."

"Toutokubara-san. Please serve tea to the both of them."

"Certainly."

"Ah, Kanata, I'd like some too."

"Kanata-sempai! I wanna eat some madeleines!"

"You two bad children will go without afternoon snacks today."

"Wha-What are you saying!"

"You're so mean, Touka! If we don't get afternoon snacks, why would we come to the student council room!?"

"It's because you're student council officers, right!?"

Touka raised her voice in a scream. The student council president's life was summarized by that retort.

To Touka who was wildly gasping for breath from that strain,

Saijou who was holding back the closet seemed to give her a grave look and spoke with an admiring voice.

"But it's just like the president. The job was quick, finding helpers for the thing we were talking about. It was a good selection too. If it's these two, their combat ability is nothing to complain about.

Combat ability? Helpers?

Ikki and Stella came to attention and tilted their heads at the words with a suddenly dangerous atmosphere. Those words, they hadn't heard them from Touka even once. They shifted their eyes to Touka to ask what he was saying.

"Yes?"

Touka herself also sported a puzzled face as if asking what this was about.

Saijou looked baffled by this response.

"Umm, was I wrong? I thought that had to be the reason for such unusual guests."

"What's this, Touka? It can't be that you forgot about it? Look, didn't the board chairman make the request?"

"Something Kurono-san requested… ah, aaaaahhh!"

At that moment, Touka screamed with a paled face.

"Oh my, did you really forget about it? Even though I also thought that was surely the reason you brought those two here."

"…Au, yes. I was concentrating on the match with Shizuku-san and forgot…."

"Umm, what are you all talking about?"

Stella, who was sitting next to Ikki, asked that of Touka who was greatly troubled and downhearted. The one who answered wasn't Touka, but Toutokubara while she poured black tea for everyone.

"A few days ago, the student council received a favor from Board Chairman Shinguuji. Although representative contenders usually lodge together before the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival at a training camp in Okutama[7], recently there has been a suspicious person appearing there."

"It's not quiet, then."

"Yes. Confirming the safety of that place just in case has been left to the student council, because the teachers are currently very busy with administering the Selection Battles. …However, there are high mountains and wide forests at the boarding house grounds, and the student council alone are not at all sufficient to cover it."

"I see. So you're saying you need helpers for the outside areas?"

It seemed that it wasn't just the teachers who were busy with the large-scale Selection Battles.

"Incidentally, what kind of character is that suspicious person? Is there any information?"

"Yes, these is some, but—"

Toutokubara hesitated for a moment, but answered.

"It seems it is a giant with a height of four meters."

"Huh!?"

"G-Giant!?"

"Yes, giant. Not the professional baseball team[8], you know?"

"I know."

"And also not at all, All Ha●shin-san's partner[9], you know?"

"I know. I mean, I'm surprised that Toutokubara-san knows of him."

"H-Hey, this thing about a giant, is that true!?"

Suddenly, Stella leaned forward and bit into the abruptly

nonsensical topic.

"You're really getting into that, huh Stella."

"B-But! A giant! That's a cryptid, you know! Isn't it intriguing?"

The scarlet pupils of the girl who was speaking were sparkling entirely like a young child. To that response from Stella, Renren agreed as if she had just found a comrade.

"Hey! Stella-chan likes that sort of thing!"

"Since I learned Japanese from *Kawag●chi Hiroshi Tankentai* DVDs[10], I love them!"

What a staggering place to get into Japan, this imperial princess…!

Though unlike Ikki who felt a bit conflicted, Renren seemed to have found a kindred spirit in Stella.

"Ooh! Stella-chan, tell me about it!"

"That might be almost—"

"Vice president, we can't go further into that."

"Hey, hey Ikki! Since Touka-san also looks troubled, let's cooperate! I want to see a giant!"

Stella shook Ikki's shoulder while her eyes sparkled.

Frankly, Ikki wasn't curious about some giant, but—he was someone who reaped the benefit of the Selection Battle system that was making the student council busy. So the idea of cooperating with them felt like an obligation. Therefore he acknowledged it immediately.

"If that's what you're talking about, then as a student I'll happily cooperate."

"R-Really!?"

To Ikki and Stella's ready consent, Touka's face that had been

troubled and depressed regained its vitality.

"The boarding house is also an institution for students, right? If our help is enough—"

"It's more than enough! Thank you so much, really! You're very much saving us!"

Speaking with a lively voice, Touka offered a handshake that expressed her feelings of gratitude. But—

Grab!

The hand that Touka was extending to Ikki was intercepted by Stella. Making up for Ikki, Stella shook Touka's hand enthusiastically.

"Best regards, best regards."

"Eh? Ah, yes, my best regards as well."

Thus Ikki and Stella made plans to go next weekend with the student council members to Okutama.

References

1. ↑ *Toudo Heigen*, 凍土平原: "Plain of Frozen Soil"
2. ↑ *Byakuya Kekkai*, 白夜結界: "White Night Barrier". A "white night" is a summer night near the North or South Pole in which the sun is still in the sky at midnight.
3. ↑ *Hisuijin*, 緋水刃: Scarlet Water Blade"
4. ↑ *Rur●Ken*, *Dragon B●ll*, *Sla● Dunk*: Respectively, *Rurouni Kenshin* by Nobuhiro Watsuki, *Dragon Ball* by Akira Toriyama, and *Slam Dunk* by Takehiko Inoue.
5. ↑ *Hagurin*: The Japanese name for Babs, the player-recruitable Metal Babble monster in Dragon Quest VI.
6. ↑ *Jizou*: The Japanese name for the boddhisatva Ksitigarbha, patron of deceased children. Statues of Jizou depicting him as a bald Buddhist monk are commonly found on roadsides and graveyards.
7. ↑ *Okutama*: The northernmost, westernmost, and largest town of the Tokyo Metropolis area.
8. ↑ The Yomiuri Giants, one of Tokyo's two teams in the Nippon Professional Baseball Central League.
9. ↑ *All Ha●shin-san*: *All Hanshin* ("All Osaka-Kobe"), real name Akinori Takada, who is one member of a Japanese comedic duo. His duo partner *All Kyojin* ("All Giant"), real name Shigeru Minamide, stands 184.3 centimeters high.
10. ↑ *Kawag●chi Hiroshi Tankentai*: *Explorer and Adventurer Kawaguchi Hiroshi*, 川口浩探検隊, a jungle exploration series that ran from 1978 to 1985 as part of the variety show *Suiyou Special*.

Chapter 2: Mystery in Okutama

破軍学園壁新聞

キャラクタートピックス　　文責・日下部加々美

KANATA TOTOKUBARA

貴徳原カナタ

■PROFILE

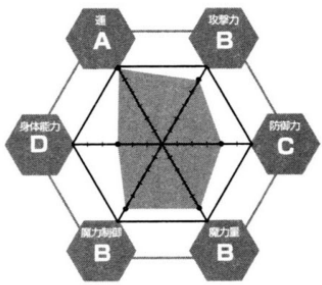
所属：破軍学園三年三組

伐刀者ランク：B

伐刀絶技：星屑の剣（ダイヤモンドダスト）

二つ名：紅の淑女（シャルラッハフラウ）

人物概要：破軍学園生徒会会計



かがみんチェック！

日本でも指折りの超一流セレブ貴徳原家のお嬢様！
だけとその一方で騎士としてもすごく優秀で、学生の身分でありながら『特別招集』という形で実戦の現場に出入りしている武闘派でもあるよ。
《星屑の剣》は対人性能に特化した伐刀絶技で、目視出来ないほどに細かく砕いた霊剣の欠片を空気中に漂わせて、それを吸い込んだ敵を内側から切り刻むんだとか！　ひぇぇ。そんな特性上、返り血がすごいからいつも傘を持ち歩いているんだって。おお怖い怖い。

Part 1

Tokyo Metropolitan Area, Shinjuku Ward. Between other skyscrapers standing in a row, the thirty-story skyscraper of the Japanese branch of the League of Mage-Knight Nations towered over them.

In the branch leader's office at the top floor, Japanese branch head Itsuki Kurogane sported deep wrinkles on his brow while holding the telephone on his desk.

"I see. Shizuku lost."

A sigh resounded frightfully in the room that was as dim as night.

「Her opponent was 'Raikiri', so maybe it was inevitable.」

"Nangou-sensei's prized child, was it?"

「Yes. Shizuku-san was unlucky. If it weren't for how stupidly the selection battles were arranged, she likely could've easily become a representative.」

How stupidly.

Itsuki nodded without voicing his agreement with the words from the man on the phone. Those words were certainly accurate.

Selecting representatives based on real battles, the method suggested by Shinguuji, the new board chairman—Itsuki had repudiated it head-on as something abominable.

"And? What became of Ikki?"

「…The 'Worst One' is maintaining his streak of perfect victories even now. Sheesh, Hagun's students are so disappointing. To let an

F-Rank dunce get this far.」

"Does it seem like he'll become a representative?"

「While I'm sorry to say it, that dunce has already brought down the 'Crimson Princess' and the school's third-ranked 'Runner's High'. The way Hagun's people have been disappointing so far, no matter how a fight between Raikiri and the Crimson Princess plays out… he'll be shown in front of the whole country.」

"That is unacceptable."

A situation Itsuki didn't even want to imagine was becoming reality, and Itsuki's voice grew as heavy as lead.

「Y-Yes! Exactly as you say!」

"Is there anything we can do?"

「Ah, if the director's authority is used to revoke his qualifications as a student knight….」

"…If that was an option, I would've taken it a long time ago. But whether it's a mage-knight or a student knight, the ones who control those qualifications are the white-bearded officials of the League of Mage-Knight Nations—in other words, the head office holds that authority. A branch can make a divestiture demand but can't do the divesting itself. If that demand isn't made with some basis, it lacks persuasiveness."

One year ago, they'd even spurred on the 'Hunter' in order to get that persuasive power, but Ikki had stubbornly refused to be baited. Even though the Hunter had driven him to the verge of death, he still avoided the temptation.

If Ikki was going to resist, then he'd be prevented from gaining combat experience. Therefore, Itsuki would be strict even to the point of forcing him to repeat a grade. To have him expelled by snatching away his qualifications as a student knight, Itsuki needed to take the first step of getting him removed from school.

However, that was helpless talk based on Itsuki's limited authority.

To make it work, he needed a basis to persuade those entitled people.

"In any case, if we don't do something effective before the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival begins—"

At that moment—

"For this situation with Ikki Kurogane, I have an excellent idea."

From the dark, a droll male voice resounded. The voice came from the doorway. Itsuki turned his eyes languidly, and as if permeating the entire dark room, an obese middle-age man with an Ebisu-like face[1] stood there.

Itsuki remembered that face.

"Akaza, is it?"

"It's been a while, honorable clan head. Nha ha ha."

The middle-aged man was Mamoru Akaza, a branch member of the Kurogane family.

"…You said you have an excellent idea?"

Asking that, Itsuki hung up the telephone. The voice on the other hand was already less interesting than Akaza's words.

Grasping the situation, Akaza pasted a shady smile on his grateful face and made a noise in his throat.

"Nha ha ha. Yes, the truth is, I have some interesting information from some of my dumb muscle subordinates. If it's used well, the anxiety that the honorable clan head is currently feeling can be cleansed—"

Part 2

On the next Sunday, Ikki Kurogane and Stella Vermillion rode to Hagun Academy's training camp deep in the mountains of Okutama along with the student council members in a van that Saijou drove.

They were after Okutama's mystery, to determine the true identity of the rumored giant. However, the training camp grounds were endowed with rugged terrain of many mountains and deep forest. To search that with only seven people, even Blazers couldn't do it half-heartedly.

Since that was the case, they could hardly start without first filling their stomachs and restoring their energy. Therefore Ikki and Stella left speaking with the administrators to Saijou and Toutokubara, and made curry for lunch with the remaining members.

Dividing all of the tasks between them, using the cookware borrowed from the training camp grounds, they carried the ingredients Touka brought to a campsite.

They could've rented the dining hall as well, but since they went to the trouble of coming to the mountains, they went with the flow and made camp curry instead.

"Nn~. The fresh air feels great."

While bringing cookware like kitchen knife and chopping board, and setting up the cooking area with bricks, Stella took a grand breath.

"Since there's little asphalt here, the air is really crisp, isn't it?"

"Japan has concrete everywhere. It's too well settled. It's unbearably hot and humid."

"Well, the country is practically subtropic as well."

Stella's motherland, the Vermillion Empire, was located in northern Europe. It had a colder atmosphere, and was also drier. For Stella who was brought up in that kind of country, the Japanese summer that she was experiencing for the first time was frankly draining.

In truth, Ikki had recently been hearing Stella groaning at night as if unable to sleep. Since Japan's summers were hot enough that people died from it, her discomfort was understandable.

"Hey hey, Stella-chan! Let's play badminton together!"

Suddenly, Renren, who had been a step ahead and was done with hauling cookware, waved a racket in one hand and called out to Stella.

"Okay! But I'm pretty good, you know?"

"What was that～? I won't lose with my footwork! Come and get it!"

"Hmph～♪ I'll make you regret challenging me to this game!"

Stella accepted Renren's invitation enthusiastically.

"Ah, Stella…."

Ikki called out to stop them, but Stella was already running off.

"Oh man, even though we said we'd make lunch right now."

To Ikki who was sighing, Touka smiled cheerfully as she carried a bag full of supermarket ingredients.

"It's fine. We don't need that many people to make curry. Let's leave cleaning up to those two."

"I guess we should. Ah, that's right. How much did the groceries cost? We'll pay our share."

"Ha ha ha. You don't need to worry about that sort of thing, since you two came to help us out. We'll pay for things like food at least.

Or should I say, if we don't treat you, I'll feel bad about it."

Touka shrugged as if slightly troubled. Certainly, Ikki would feel equally guilty if he were in Touka's place. It'd embarrass both of them if he refused after this.

"…In that case, I'll accept your kind offer."

Utakata chimed in.

"Touka's curry is made from a secret homemade recipe for curry roux, so it's ridiculously tasty."

"Yes. By all means, please look forward to it."

"But let me help prepare it at least."

"Then Kurogane-san, please peel the potatoes and carrots."

"Got it."

"Uta-kun, you'll prepare the rice?"

"For making that curry, the rice will of course be *that*, right?"

"Yes. I've bought proper California rice, so I'll leave it to you."

"Heh. I'm itching to get started."

Utakata and Touka somehow spoke to each other with their eyes.

Ikki who was watching through it all didn't understand any of it, but he was at least able to appreciate their very close relationship.

Part 3

It had already been five years since he left home. He had lived alone for such a long time, and naturally mastered skills in housework. Therefore Ikki finished the duties he had been assigned extremely skillfully.

First, he soaked the peeled potatoes in water, so that they wouldn't fall apart while cooking. Then while the potatoes were soaking, he peeled the carrots and chopped them into bite-size pieces, and brought them to Touka.

On the way, Ikki suddenly stopped.

Touka, wearing an apron, was cutting meat and mincing onion with magnificent technique while humming the hero's theme song of a nation-wide anime.

His breath caught at the sight of this figure that gave an impression of a young wife, because that figure, like a painting, carried a consummate sense of beauty.

"Hmm? Is something the matter?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing."

Touka called out to him after looking over her shoulder, and Ikki

came back to his senses.

What was I doing? …Just now, I was swallowed up in Touka-san's atmosphere.

After having seen Raikiri take down Shizuku with overwhelming power, he hadn't felt anything about Touka up until now. The mysterious thoughts notwithstanding, Ikki rolled that question around his head, and brought to Touka the vegetables he was carrying.

"Here are the potatoes and carrots. I've soaked the potatoes in water."

"Thanks for the work. Wow, they're peeled so beautifully. And the size of the cuts is great."

"Since we're going through the trouble of eating outdoors, I thought it'd be great to have hometown curry."

"A gold star for a perfect score. Kurogane-san is good with a kitchen knife as he is with a sword, I see."

"Ha ha, I've lived by myself for a long time, after all. Is there anything else I can help with?"

"No. I can do the rest myself, so you can take a break."

Certainly, two people over one pot would be nothing but a hassle. Ikki accepted Touka's suggestion, and stepped out of the cooking area.

In the middle of doing so—

"Ha ha ha. What's wrong, Kouhai-kun[2]? Were you fascinated by Touka's hu~ge butt, I wonder?"

Utakata, who was boiling rice in an outdoor cooking pot, was questioning Ikki's brief pause in staring at Touka just a moment ago.

"N-No! That wasn't what I was doing!"

Ikki immediately threw out a denial.

Touka's butt certainly looked round and soft, and a boy couldn't help but feel fascinated by it, but—

"No, what am I thinking…. I don't really understand myself, but… that is, I was captivated by the sight of Toudou-san cooking. How do I put it, it was as though I couldn't bring myself to look away."

"Oh~…."

Utakata oohed and aahed at Ikki's reply with great interest.

"Couldn't bring yourself to look away, is it? Yep. And even realizing it on the first glance. Kouhai-kun really isn't an ordinary person."

"What do you mean?"

"You felt that seeing her like that was something you couldn't pass up, right? That sensation is honest, you know. That sight is close to the core, the source of Touka's strength."

"The source of her strength?"

"Yeah, I've been watching Touka since the old days, and I know that well."

Since the old days—

Sometime ago when Utakata and Touka had exchanged eye contact, Ikki had felt some kind of old connection between them. Ikki spoke frankly about that feeling.

"Misogi-san, have you been acquainted with Toudou-san since long ago?"

"Hmm? Yeah. You see, me and Touka came from the same orphanage."

"Eh…."

"It was the Wakaba House, one of the social welfare services

developed by the Toutokubara Foundation. They took custody of children without relatives and brought them up. Both me and Touka were at that institution. Since Kanata was also coming and going at that place, we've all been friends since those days. The three of us did all kinds of stuff."

"Is… is that so?"

Utakata said it like it was nothing, but Ikki showed just a bit of embarrassment in response. He had expected them to be childhood friends, but it was completely outside his expectations that they had come from the same institution.

It was what it was, and more than that, Ikki found it difficult to decide whether he should go deeper into this subject, but….

The source of Toudou-san's strength.

The words from Utakata who has watched her since the old days, they would arouse interest without fail. What kind of girl was Touka Toudou?

Therefore, Ikki asked him boldly.

"Umm, do you mind telling me about it, Misogi-san? What did you mean by the source of Toudou-san's strength?"

At that inquiry, Utakata sank into a brief silence, then spoke.

"…Kouhai-kun, what kind of place do you think of when you hear the word orphanage?"

"An establishment where children live when they don't have relatives… right?"

"Well, that's quite correct, but the 'don't have relatives' part can be complicated. Some kids lose their parents to accidents and misfortune, some kids are thrown away by their parents… those kinds of children are still better off than some who are almost killed by their parents before child services separate them… eh, there are all sorts."

"By their parents… is it?"

"Yep. And our facility in those days had kids in those kinds of splendidly complex situations and, how do I say this, the atmosphere was bad. With a company of fellows having such circumstances, hurt and abused for trivial reasons, …everyone was suffering. But in the middle of that, Touka had a smiling face for everyone and always did her best for them. Even though she was also in the same environment. She read picture books for the small children, and on the orphanage director's behalf made delicious food… because the director was a very nice person, but the cooking was unbearably unpleasant. Everyone was super happy about that, you know. Ahaha."

"She was a very helpful person, wasn't she?"

"In the old days. She was the type who always had to meddle in other people's business. …Even with the guy who was almost killed by his parents. That one was already unmanageably violent anyway, so broken he couldn't be helped, but no matter how he injured Touka over and over again, Touka couldn't abandon him even once. Thanks to that… he got his humanity back again. He managed to recover human emotions. That's why that guy is still thankful to Touka to this day, and loves her very much."

Utakata lowered his eyes humbly, and spoke of the old days. The tone of the story had turned to first-person here and there. Perhaps… it was likely that the child who was almost killed by his parents was Utakata himself.

"That guy asked Touka once. Why was Touka so strong? That she would care no matter what. Touka who was in the same situation of having no parents, even though she was the same as the other kids, why she loved everyone else that much. And Touka answered."

「My parents loved me very much. It might've been a very short time that I had an ordinary family, but I received a lot of smiles and affection. With those memories, my dead parents continue to support me even now. Because of that, I want to smile at the other kids too. I want to make memories that can support everyone, the way my parents did for me. Because to love others is something

precious and beloved that my parents taught me. 」

And then—

"Exactly as she said, Touka continued to give her smile and her courage to everyone in Wakaba House until she left the facility. She continued to demonstrate to us orphans that even we can become great people. And she's energetically continuing to do so as someone with top strength among the entire nation's student knights, Raikiri."

Having heard that much, Ikki also understood what Utakata meant when he spoke of "the source of that girl's strength".

It was—good intentions.

Demonstrating a peerless strength not for her own sake, but for other people. Touka Toudou was a young lady who held that kind of spirit. Ikki had caught a glimpse and was captivated by a fragment of that in seeing the figure of Touka making food to treat Ikki and the others.

Therefore, he had recognized the information that couldn't be overlooked, the heart that the foundation of her strength was built on.

"—Kouhai-kun. You're strong. And you're more frank than I expected. I'm not at the level to compete with you face-to-face, and I think even Kanata wouldn't be a close call. But someone like you can't surpass Touka. Touka's strength is extraordinary. The reason is because that girl knows what it would mean for her to lose, and how many people will grieve if it happens. That's why she can't lose. That's why she can't break. Between the two of you, the weight of responsibility you're carrying is different."

Ikki didn't answer those words. His gaze simply left Utakata and turned to Touka who was cooking cheerfully, his thoughts moving in her direction. To those delicate shoulders burdened by the hopes and prayers of many people. And to the answer regarding Touka's strength.

…Certainly, I don't have that kind of thing.

Ikki came this far by only believing in his own worth. Not relying on anyone, not doing it for anyone. Simply working for the sake of his own dream. Therefore, the weight that Utakata spoke of didn't dwell in Ikki's sword. No one else's hopes dwelled there.

That truth coiled around Ikki's heart like a dark, vague shape. And he asked himself. Was his sword, lacking that weight, able to defeat that girl?

Part 4

Lunch was curry made with garlic rice instead of white rice.

It seemed to be a recipe from the time at Wakaba House, when there wasn't much money to spend and everyone couldn't make feasts to rejoice over, so Touka, Utakata, and Kanata put it together through trial and error.

Touka had dissolved ample amounts of savory beef tendon into the homemade curry roux she brought to camp in Tupperware, and together with the fragrant aroma of garlic rice, there was no way it could be unappetizing.

Because Ikki had never eaten such delicious curry before, he had unfortunately stuffed himself too much unintentionally. But in the other direction, unlike the four people who were eating normally, Stella didn't have very much. Maybe she wasn't hungry.

Then after lunch, Touka chose how to settle their stomachs by splitting them into groups so that they could walk around.

After all, though they were Blazers, it was too dangerous for people to walk in the mountains alone.

The groups were Touka and Utakata, Saijou and Renren, and lastly Ikki and Stella. As a provision for emergencies, only Kanata remained in the training camp building, and the party finally set out on their mountain hunt.

The objective was to find a giant and secure it.

The Ikki/Stella group was walking around the area that they were entrusted with, the mountain forest on the west side.

This location was different from the ordinary mountains that a

mountaineer would go through. It was part of a facility for Blazer training. Consequently, there the trails were not well maintained, and vegetation grew dense and abundantly all over the place. In addition the slope of the terrain was severe. It was very much a precipitous trail.

No, if it was simply precipitous, then for Ikki and Stella who regularly trained their bodies, it wouldn't be anything special, but—

"Huh, again?"

Ikki caught in his left hand a shadow that leaped from the thickets with a crunching sound. It was a pit viper with its fangs bared.

This was already the third time. The ruggedness of the trail aside, for surprise attacks to continue like this was a little tiresome.

Ikki threw the viper far away with a snap of his wrist, and tentatively called for Stella's attention as she followed behind him.

"It looks like this side of the river has a lot of poisonous snakes. They're not the type to kill with a bite, but Stella, you should be careful."

"…Right."

Stella's answer wasn't energetic. How should he put it, at a glance, Stella didn't have much ambition right now. With the spirit she had shown at the student council office before, she should probably be leading the charge, pushing her way through the thicket. That was how she should be, but Stella right now was sagging her shoulders and slouching, and only following Ikki from behind sluggishly.

"What's wrong? You don't look too lively, but did losing at badminton shock you that much?"

It seemed that the badminton match with Renren had ended with Stella's utter defeat. Stella had miscalculated the force of her smashes, ruining herself by hitting the birdie out of the court again and again.

Certainly the matter would make her sulk, he thought, but….

"It's not really about that…."

Stella answered with a denial. But as she answered, there was an indecisiveness in her voice, as if the person herself didn't entirely understand why she wasn't energetic.

I wonder what's really the matter?

Ikki tilted his head in puzzlement at his sweetheart who was acting different from usual.

But at that moment, he didn't grasp how huge the change was.

I wonder if she's just a little worn out from not being used to mountain trails.

"Follow me properly so you don't get lost, okay?"

Saying that, Ikki cleared the way forward through the thicket so that Stella would have an easier path.

But he was mistaken. This abnormality of Stella's wasn't something that should be disregarded.

Part 5

At around two hours of walking the unpaved trail—

…Looks like the weather's getting bad, huh?

Ikki stared at the sky through spaces in the dense foliage above. The sky visible through the leaves that had been dazzlingly green just a while ago was now darkened into an ashen shadow of itself. It was a color that suggested it could start raining at any time. He had heard that the weather in the mountains can change quickly, but this much? And since they were high above sea level, he also felt unpleasantly cold.

Could it be that rain is coming?

"Hmm?"

Lowering his eyes back down from the sky, Ikki suddenly saw something unusual.

Fallen trees.

And not just one or two of them. Ten or twenty trees had collapsed, opening a clearing in the mountain forest.

That cause was the ground, as if something gigantic had crawled out of the ground, turning over the brown earth as it came up and bringing the deep scent of soil in doing so. The trees that were standing there were similarly uprooted.

The huge gouge had a diameter of about five meters. And in the horribly muddy, mushed-up ground, there was a footprint of fifty centimeters wide.

"This is…!"

That shape wasn't from the hoof of a beast, but resembled a human's footprint. But there were no humans that big, so the maker of this footprint was no human—perhaps it was the rumored giant.

"Hey Stella, this—"

Ikki called out to report his discovery to Stella behind him—

"Ha… ha…."

When he saw Stella breathing heavily and leaning on a tree for support, he noticed something.

"Stella? Could it be you're worn out…?"

He thought she was leaning on the tree because the mountain trail had fatigued her, but he was wrong. Ikki realized it as he looked at Stella's face. Even though the air was this cold, Stella's face was deeply red, and her forehead was packed with drops of sweat.

It was to an unusual degree. It was strange under any circumstance.

"Stella!? What happened to make you sweat so much?"

"I-I don't know…. It's just, for a while now my body has been really heavy… I've been nauseous, and dizzy…. Hey Ikki, there's something I need to tell you."

Stella raised her red face listlessly, and put on a very serious expression. From her heavy but indecisive seriousness, he easily knew the inquiry was about something very important. What was she going to say?

Ikki gulped, and braced himself.

"What is it?"

And she asked—

"Do kisses cause pregnancy?"

He almost fell to his knees in the aftermath of his exhaustion.

"…No. No they don't."

He didn't want to think about how frightening humanity would be if kissing a girl made her pregnant.

"I mean, Stella, are you not feeling well?"

"Lovesickness…?"

"No. Umm, in English it would be *cold*, wouldn't it? No, don't they call it *fever*?"

"O-Oh… I guess I understand it."

Stella managed to dig out Ikki's meaning from his awkward English.

"I see. This is… the 'cold' I've heard about."

"Stella, have you never had a cold?"

"Not once…. Oh, right…. When I was a child, I was envious of people having an excuse to take a break from school, but this doesn't feel like anything to envy."

Stella declared that and forced herself to laugh. For her, it was the first time her body had experienced such a thing. That was why she couldn't figure out until now the reason her body was in a bad condition. Perhaps, in Japan's hot and humid climate which her body hadn't adapted to yet, her immunity had fallen.

"It's impossible to keep investigating with your condition, I guess. Let's go back right now."

"W-Wait a second…. Since we just found a clue after all that work…."

"Even if you say that, you probably can't move anymore, right?"

"That's not true. Something like this… w-what?"

"Stella!"

Stella tried to separate from the tree she was leaning on, when she

trembled unexpectedly and began to fall to the ground.

Ikki moved quickly, and just barely caught her on his chest. And he noticed her temperature; it was so abnormally high that he could feel it through her clothes.

This is worse than I thought….

Stella didn't realize she had a cold, and worsened it by pushing herself to the limit. If they didn't get down from the mountain immediately….

Ikki made that judgment, and picked her body up in his arms.

"Even if you don't like it, I'm going to carry you back like this."

"Ah, uuu…."

Stella made a face like she was a little dissatisfied, but gave up resistance at Ikki's forceful tone. But naturally, Stella's intentions aside, her body already had no energy to spare for resistance. As proof, Stella breathed roughly and entrusted her body to Ikki.

If we don't get out of the mountains and have a doctor examine her….

For Ikki, running down a mountain while carrying a person wasn't difficult. Reaching the bottom of the mountain probably wouldn't take much time. That had to be true. But this was when trouble sprang up.

drip, drop

Rain fell onto Ikki's head from the gray sky. And soon after, the rain turned to bucketfuls coming down.

Recently, the subtropical parts of Japan had seen lots of squalls and heavy rains.

"Whoa, with this timing…!"

Ikki aside, right now was a bad time for Stella to get rained on. If her body got cold, her immunity would drop even more. Her body

was still strong enough to fight the illness, but if her body got worse here, the illness could even become as bad as pneumonia.

If that happened, it would affect her representative selection battle matches. He had to prevent that at all costs.

—That's right! On the way here, there was a small shack at the river for emergency evacuation!

Recalling that, Ikki changed his plan immediately. He gave up the idea of running down the mountain, and decided to wait out the rain in that shack for now.

Part 6

It was a small distance to the mountain shack, and by the time they finally managed to arrive there, both Ikki and Stella were completely soaked.

There, Ikki raised a fire in the shack's sunken fireplace in order to dry their clothes. And while he fed the fire with the stored firewood, he used the student datapad's telephone function to get in touch with Kanata who was standing by at the training camp lodge.

「Stella-san collapsed?」

"Yes. At the moment, I've carried her to a shack nearby to take shelter."

「Oh my…. How bad is it?」

"I think it's probably just a bad cold, but a doctor should still examine her."

"I understand. I'll send for a rescue immediately."

"That'll really help. Also, about the giant we were looking for, we found footprints that look to come from such a thing. What's more, there were signs that something gigantic came out of the earth. It might be that the giant is underground."

"Underground… is it? We're suddenly talking about something unbelievable like a gigantic creature underground, but… alright, I understand. We'll take over investigating those traces. The two of you should stay in the mountain shack, and please rest and wait for the rescue personnel. I believe they will arrive in an hour or two. The outside is becoming extremely cold, so please don't forget to dry off."

"Yes. Please take care of the investigation for us."

Ending the telephone call, Ikki threw the last of the firewood onto the fire. Because he did so, the inside of the room became much warmer.

"Great. Now our clothes can dry."

Ikki stripped off his dripping clothes, leaving only his trousers, and spread them near the sunken fireplace. After that, he turned his back to the partition with difficulty, and called out to Stella who was still breathing poorly.

"Stella, you should undress too. You might think it's embarrassing, but if you stay like that your cold will get worse."

"…Alright."

Stella and Ikki were a couple, but that relationship had only just recently reached the level of kissing. For Stella, she was certainly reluctant to reveal her bare skin to her sweetheart. But she didn't complain. She meekly took off her soaked jacket, and reached for the clasp of her skirt.

Stella understood. This wasn't the time to be obstinate. She had to make sure her physical condition didn't get worse. For both Ikki and Stella, it was a critical stage. They were fighting in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival selection battles that were limited to only six winners. If her cold worsened due to her spirit going down, the cherished promise between them would be finished.

That vow to meet in the Sword-Art Festival finals. That was the most important thing. Stella wasn't a girl who'd confuse that priority.

But….

"Ah."

"Stella!"

When she tried to step out of her skirt, Stella's body tumbled down.

With her body in such poor shape for the first time in her life, Stella didn't know how much it had worsened, didn't know that the effects were so huge, she didn't even have the strength left to remove her own clothes. Ikki, who caught her on his chest before she fell to the ground, also recognized that.

The temperature he felt through her clothes, it had grown higher since the last time. Stella's condition was worsening by the moment. He didn't want her to do anything unreasonable, any more than this. Therefore Ikki boldly suggested something to Stella.

"Stella, those clothes, should I help you out of them?"

To that suggestion, Stella opened her scarlet eyes wide. Of course she did. Even though she was already embarrassed by the idea of showing her skin, to have Ikki take off her clothes? That kind of thing was absolutely out of the question.

—But Stella….

"…Sure… please do."

She instantly nodded her head just a little. Ikki was just as embarrassed, but he forced himself to make the suggestion. He was earnestly worried about Stella's body. It wasn't like Stella didn't understand that. That was why she decided to entrust her body to Ikki.

And Ikki also realized again that Stella was setting aside her own concern, and strongly cautioned himself.

I have to hold it together.

Stella was setting aside her own concern, suppressing her own embarrassment, and accepting his suggestion. In that case, it was out of the question for him to be strangely conscious of the situation and stir up her own shame. Right now, he was the only one who could help Stella. So that she wouldn't experience any embarrassment, he'd strip her clothes off quickly and professionally. Having any guilty thoughts was forbidden.

Okay.

After warning himself strongly, Ikki steeled his resolution and reached out for Stella's clothes. He'd start with the stockings that were clinging to her skin. Having them glued to the skin like that, the wetness was probably unpleasant. Thinking that, Ikki unfastened the garter belt that the stockings were attached to, inserted a finger into the space between one stocking and Stella's thigh, and slowly rolled the stocking down.

Under the rolled-down black cloth, a dazzling white bare foot came

into view. A calf with muscle developed by extensive exercise, from thigh to toe it was unlike the gourd shape of the Japanese who did agriculture, but a thin and straight form characteristic of a people who did hunting. Seeing this shape in Stella's long and supple legs, Ikki couldn't avoid having bad thoughts about the beauty of those legs even though he tried to gulp down the saliva in his mouth.

Moreover, those white and lovely feet being exposed were at his own fingertips. There was no way he could avoid being conscious of that. And since Stella's beautifully polished toenails were lined up with his fingers, at the time he rolled the wet stockings, Ikki felt an intense numbness running between his brain and spine, and realized the naivete of his own intentions.

…There's no way I can stay professional about this kind of thing.

If it was some other girl, Ikki might've been been able to stay disciplined. But this was the girl he loved most. That beloved girl's clothing, he was taking them off piece by piece with his own hands. It's not like he did something so sensual very often. Moreover, every time he exposed Stella's skin a little, a sweet fragrance rose up from her naked body and tickled his nose. Only by removing the stockings from both legs, Ikki's heart was already thumping so strongly that it was about to explode. With him like this already, would he be able to take off her shirt?

"But….

Ikki peeked a fleeting glance of Stella's expression. The color of Stella's face was so red that it could burst into flame at any moment. Her eyes were wet, and undoubtedly not just because her body was risking a fever.

I can't show any unreliablity right now.

"Stella, relax a little more."

Ikki, so that the he wouldn't agitate Stella's shame, spoke while smiling.

"O-Okay…."

In giving that reply, Stella wasn't very firm. Well, that was natural. She must've been at least this embarrassed with Ikki being so close to take off her clothing. It would be unreasonable to tell her to relax. In that case, there was little he could do but quickly release Stella from this situation.

Realizing this, Ikki took the button of Stella's shirt in his hand. And starting from the bottom of her neck, he undid the buttons one by one without touching her skin. It was hard to pinch the buttons of the shirt that had become damp from soaking up rainwater and were now clinging tightly to the distinctly plump shapes of Stella's breasts, but to avoid being in any way rough, he made sure to stay careful. Deliberate. And so he unwrapped Stella's chest.

After he unfastened the bottom button, Ikki took the shirt collar in his hands. And somehow opened the shirt. He pulled off the damp shirt that resisted the motion, exposing Stella's shoulder as if pulling away a veil that concealed her skin.

Her breath and throat moved together alluringly. Her lace brassiere held her large breasts tightly. A young woman's softness above a white belly squirmed greedily and contracted a little with each breath, despite how well-trained her body was.

From the slippery rain and the cold sweat of her fever, Stella's entire body glistened. That sensual brilliance….

Foom Something in Ikki's brain became charred. His throat became dry in an instant. Ikki was immediately compelled to kiss that sweetly fragrant flesh, to touch it with his tongue, to nibble it gently, to quench his thirst on that fresh moisture.

But Ikki suppressed all of that compulsion with his reason. What was he thinking while his precious Stella was suffering? He struck down those intentions that were bubbling up, and mustered his self control. If he didn't do that, his emotions would erupt. But despite that….

"Umm, Ikki… undo the bra…."

Stella, who was in her underwear, said something unthinkable.

"Eh…!? What did you just say?"

"It's really hard to breathe…. Just unfasten the hook…."

She complained with rough breaths, and Stella's chest rose and fell heavily. Certainly, the brassiere that held her chest down might be painful for Stella. It was expected for a girl with big breasts. But….

Me, undo it?

He was strongly perplexed.

But Stella said that she was in pain, and he couldn't reply with reluctance. Since she asked him to do it, she had brought forth her intention.

"Y-Yeah… got it. Leave it to me."

Feigning as much calm as possible, Ikki nodded.

Stella's brassiere had a front hook. It was a model with a shoulder strap, so there was no way to remove the brassiere without unhooking the front.

In that case, it's fine. I won't look. It's fine. It's absolutely fine.

Ikki suggested that to himself, and inserted his finger into the hook, and unfastened it with a snap.

In an instant, Stella's breasts that had been held back literally sprang out.

The two massive orbs that rose up from below his hands bounced almost with a **boing**. It was a temptation more than enough to deal a fatal blow to Ikki's tattered reasoning.

But Ikki, anticipating it, had taken measures. In the instant he unhooked the front of the brassiere, he bit his own tongue so that he wouldn't look at Stella. That sharp pain blew away any wicked emotions, and successfully held his tattered reasoning together. And

he, who got through the predicament….

What am I even fighting with here…?

His mood became somewhat miserable. He, who was putting on airs after desperately stifling himself at a girl's naked body. If he had more experience with girls, he'd probably behave with more dignity.

Even if I say that, it's too late for it.

Well anyway, he had to fulfill a man's minimum duty. Even while losing a grip on his innermost thoughts, he kept his self control, and without changing his expression, he calmly finished removing Stella's clothes. The shame he had inflicted on Stella, it surely ended up at the minimum level.

"N-Now, get under this blanket quickly. Since we're high in the mountains, it'll be cold."

Saying so, Ikki put a blanket included in the cabin's emergency supplies on Stella's shoulders. When he did so, Stella thanked him with a weak voice.

"Sorry… Ikki. For troubling you."

"It can't be helped if it's just a cold. Especially since it's your first time dealing with summer in Japan."

"It's also true, but… you looked like you were having a hard time…."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

Ikki became flustered. He must've kept his face from showing anything.

But Stella's gaze wasn't on Ikki's face. She was surprised, staring lower on his body with astonished eyes—exactly on Ikki's waist.

—He had a horribly unpleasant hunch.

"It… it became amazing…."

Ikki, who presently laid his eyes on his own waist, realized that one section of his own body had not been calm.

"…oh."

This is bad….

It wasn't at the level that he could hide with a distraction. While the lower part of his body was in that condition, his face was quite ashamed. He wanted to die.

"A-Ahaha…. how do I explain this? It's something that happens to men, a part that moves unintentionally, and it would be a big help if you could overlook this happening right now."

As he expected, things became awkward, and Ikki mumbled his explanation while avoiding Stella's eyes. But to Ikki—

"Nn… don't apologize…."

Stella gently smiled with her face bathed in sweat.

"…It's… certainly embarrassing, but… but like I said at the pool, if it's you, I don't hate it…. Rather, I know you got excited because of me, and it makes me happy."

W-Wha….

Left dizzy and shaking wildly, Ikki fell prostrate on the spot.

It was probably her fever talking. Stella's state was different from the usual. Her eyebrows dropping from lack of strength and her damp eyes, they looked meek and fragile. He couldn't help but tell this girl how cute she was, hug her immediately, and kiss her.

But Stella turned her eyes to peek at him, and…

"Hey Ikki…"

…said something outrageous.

"…do you want to… do it with me?"

"……Eh?"

For an instant, Ikki couldn't understand what he had just been

asked. But the confusion from the surprise attack only lasted that instant. He immediately understood how lethal the inquiry was.

"EEEEEHHHHH!?"

He screamed from astonishment.

"W-Wait, Stella, do you know what you just said to me!?"

"Yes… I understand it."

"Erk."

Ikki was reflected in earnest scarlet eyes. Those eyes were slightly clouded in fever, but gave an extremely serious gaze. It wasn't a joke, she definitely wasn't saying it because she was delirious from fever. Stella was seriously asking Ikki. Ikki recognized it at that moment.

"…**gulp**"

But even if he recognized it, what should he do? Should he say what he really thought?

Ikki didn't deny the answer to that question one bit. Of course he wanted to. Not just today. Whenever he kissed her, whenever he held her hands, whenever he hugged her. At various times, Ikki felt that impulse in himself. It was right on target. Because Ikki was a boy, and Stella was a girl. There was no way he could deceive himself. It was the natural progression in how a person thinks of his sweetheart.

Nevertheless. There was a special meaning in those words. Humans were creatures who confirmed their intentions with words. Those confirmed intentions decided the distance between two people. If Ikki returned an honest answer here, if Stella answered as well—

…The things that came out of our mouths can't be taken back…!

He wasn't confident enough to finish it. If he finished it in this place, after going back to the dorm, after Stella's cold got better, those things would be settled but there would be other effects he

couldn't suppress.

But he must not do that. Ikki thought so. He couldn't make a mistake in this procedure. Therefore—

"Sorry…. That question, I can't answer it yet."

Gazing straight back at those scarlet eyes, Ikki gave his response.

"Stella, I love you, and I want to say so proudly in front of everyone. Shizuku and Alice of course, and even people we don't know… even Stella's parents. I think these feelings inside me are the most wonderful emotions. But… if our relationship changes like this right now, I think I would feel guilty in front of your parents. I think I should stand proudly in front of them."

Both Stella and Ikki had mature bodies. It wasn't like there was any fear of what others might think. But still—Ikki thought there was a proper procedure for such important things. Stella was a precious treasure raised by her parents. If he would get involved, he had to at least greet them. He thought that was rather expected of a man.

"That's why, sorry."

He couldn't answer Stella's question, so Ikki apologized again. Saying so honestly, Ikki grasped even the rest of the current of the current situation. He really wanted to announce the relationship between him and Stella. If he did so, he could stand proud in front of anyone and say that he loved Stella. But he couldn't do that, in the end. If he announced it, there would be a scandal. Stella, who was a public figure, would suffer under the burden whether she's willing or not. He wanted to protect her from that during the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. For that reason, he had to respect that limit during that time.

That was what Ikki thought. It was a stubborn way to think, but this was something he couldn't compromise. Even if she thought he was a loser for it. Ikki explained this to Stella.

"No, that's not it."

Suddenly, Stella entwined her fingers with Ikki's. She gave a firm

smile with her feverish expression.

"I said something strange, and bothered you to think about it so seriously. Sorry."

She apologized to Ikki. That expression was feverish and hot, but it wasn't just from illness.

「I love you, and I want to say so proudly in front of everyone.」

…He thought of me that importantly….

In truth, Stella hadn't been thinking of Ikki as much as he had been thinking of her. Stella had only been looking only at Ikki in front of her, but Ikki had been looking toward the people in her background, as well as keeping the relationship between them going into the future in mind as well.

It—made her very happy. Because he was thinking so seriously about their relationship, treating it as something important.

I say that, but… what was I doing!?

Just by taking off her clothes a little, from getting a little excited, she had forgotten her chastity. Not just today. It kept happening recently. A unicorn would shun such a maiden.

Ikki is more like a maiden, isn't he?

She became ashamed after realizing her intentional thoughtlessness from before.

"…I must've become strange from the fever. I'll take a little rest."

Blaming her shame on her illness, Stella settled herself sideways on the blanket.

"Yeah. I'll keep an eye on the fire."

Ikki didn't keep going with the current topic either. Rather than talk about it with a girl, he held off. He probably thought he was embarrassing Stella as well. Setting aside those thoughts, Stella

wanted to curl up.

But—

Stella, who was happy that Ikki thought so seriously about their relationship—

I really want him to say it properly after all.

Examining Ikki's words, even the feverish and befuddled Stella could understand his clumsy answer. What kind of answer was "I can't answer"? Examining the context made it simple to understand. However—she didn't want to just imagine it. She wanted to hear it from his own mouth, with his own voice.

Stella thought so no matter what. He would say it in due time. Believing that, it would probably be a mistake if she hurried him.

She didn't understand it, but she was certain of one thing.

…I'm kind of naughty….

The girl right now was clearly self-aware about that.

Part 7

Soon after the question that was a little dangerous, Stella fell asleep wrapped in her blanket. However, she only did so for thirty minutes. When she woke up again, Stella's condition had become alarmingly stable. Her sweat that was flowing like a waterfall had stopped, and she spoke more without painful breaths, so with her body already revitalized she sat next to Ikki. Her cheeks were still flushed from fever, but if it was to that extent, she probably wouldn't develop pneumonia. Ikki was relieved that Stella had gotten back a bit of her vigor.

If it's like this, it might be okay to have a little talk.

Ikki thought it would be okay for her to sleep until the rescuers came, but whether Stella was bad at staying still and enjoying leisure, or whether her embarrassment at the conversation before had already come back, she was going on and on about various school topics with an unusual talkativeness. It was fun to listen to her, but Ikki only wanted to hear one thing.

So Ikki confirmed that Stella had enough energy to converse, and opened a topic himself.

"Hey, Stella."

"Hmm? What?"

"What kind of people are your parents?"

"Why… do you want to know?"

"Well you see, since we're together, we'll have to announce it sometime, right? Because of that, we have to greet them, after all. I want to know what kind of people they are before I meet them."

Meeting Stella's parents. It was unavoidable. In other words, it was a first step. At the latest, it would happen after the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. But as far as Ikki was concerned, he had to avoid confronting Stella's parents without having any information. At least, what kind of people they were. He had to know that much.

So he asked Stella, but—

"Oh, s-so that's why…. In order to announce it, huh… ooh."

To that question, Stella's face became noticeably pale. It was an expression that plainly rejected his inquiry as disagreeable. In the end—

"Hey Ikki. I have a suggestion, but… can't we hide the marriage until the last minute?"

As one would expect, Ikki couldn't hide his bewilderment.

"No, of course there's no way we could do that…. It might be good to not announce it to the world, but if we don't tell your parents at the very least…."

"About that, a daughter can just tell her father 'Surprise～☆' one way or another."

"That kind of 'Surprise～☆' isn't cute, you know. If we're not careful, he'll have a heart attack."

At least Ikki was confident that if his sister invited their father to her wedding one day over the morning newspaper, it wouldn't end with just spitting out coffee.

"But, but…."

"Umm… do you not want me to meet your parents that much?"

Having been taken to the heart of the matter, Stella nodded with a bit, though she was divided on the issue.

"Ooh… Mother is a commoner, you know? But Father is a very eccentric person, and really dotes on me, so… if he hears that you

and I are together…."

"He might oppose our relationship?"

"No. I don't think he'd oppose it."

"Then wouldn't it be fine—"

"But before deciding whether to approve it or object to it, I think he'll bury you when you come to Vermillion to greet him."

That would be absolutely not fine.

"So you're saying that since he's a genuine king, I'm not refined enough…."

"No, it's not about being refined."

Ikki had huge headache, though not from something like Stella's cold. Definitely not. But in order to properly love Stella, it was necessary to follow this procedure. That was absolute. This was a situation he wouldn't be allowed to escape. What kind of existence was his opponent? Ikki had no choice but to face him. Therefore he would do his best, and give the king of Vermillion a favorable impression.

"…W-Well, he at least treasures his daughter, right? Then he's a good father, isn't he?"

"He can't let go of his children, you know. He opposed it weeping when I decided to study abroad."

"No, anybody would try to stop it if his daughter went to study abroad because 'I'm going in order to find someone stronger than me'."

"At that time, Mother saved me by putting Father in prison, some way or another."

"'Some way or another'!? She put a king in prison 'some way or another'!? Your mother doesn't really sound like a commoner!"

"Oh, that's right. If Mother put Father in prison this time too…."

"No no no! It's fine! We'll meet them normally!"

"Eh? But you'll die?"

"Did you just say something staggering like it was natural?"

Ikki recoiled a bit at the words Stella gave with such a serious look. But for him, he was resolved for the sake of associating with Stella.

"…I'm happy that Stella is worried for me, and though the explanation ended really strangely, but I won't run away from this. I'll meet Stella's father properly, and fight for his approval. That's something I have to do as a man."

Ikki's voice was colored by a strong determination. A strong determination that would never be shaken. Understanding that, Stella took a single breath.

"…I get it. Then let's go to Vermillion and meet them."

And after that… her expression became happy, and spoke while leaning on Ikki's shoulder.

"I want to boast about my sweetheart, right?"

"Thanks, Stella."

Saying so, Ikki caressed Stella's brilliant red hair, and she narrowed her eyes happily and rubbed her cheek against Ikki's shoulder. But suddenly her expression clouded over as if she abruptly thought of something.

"…Hey Ikki, about what we just said."

With a meek face, she asked Ikki.

"Me too, I wonder if I should greet your parents?"

Stella's expression was self-conscious as she asked that. It was reasonable. She knew that outside of Shizuku, Ikki didn't have a

good relationship with his family.

And the truth was, Ikki's own expression clouded over at the question. He didn't know. Whether or not it was necessary.

—Really, was he considered a child of that family anymore? He who defied their commands, ran away from home—no, whether his father even considered them family. Ikki thought of this while recalling his own father's face.

And after thinking for a while….

"You're right. I think it's important, so when the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival is over, shall we go to the Kurogane house together once?"

Ikki answered that way. At least Ikki… thought of his father as family. His father didn't want to deal with Ikki as his son even once, but he was still Ikki's irreplaceable parent. In Ikki's heart, he wanted the day that they understood each other to come. Therefore he believed that there were still family bonds.

"…Okay. I understand."

Stella nodded at Ikki's answer.

—Honestly speaking, Stella had been uneasy about Ikki's reply at that time. Stella knew how Ikki was treated by the Kurogane family from Kurono, from Shizuku, and from Ikki himself.

「You can't do anything, so don't try.」

Were those words that a father would tell his real child? Giving up on a child's potential arbitrarily, and not just doing that, but further crushing him. That kind of parental relationship, if Stella who was brought up by loving parents saw it, it was frankly abnormal. It wasn't something parents would do. That was why she was uneasy.

「There were still family bonds.」

Thinking of the situation that way—wasn't that too naïve? And that naïve thinking, someday… wouldn't Ikki's heart be decisively

wounded?

But she couldn't say so. Of course not. Your father doesn't think of you as his child anymore. There was no way she could say something so wretched.

So Stella could only believe it herself. That Ikki's faint hope wouldn't be betrayed.

—And like that, the time came for silence between the two to break.

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, Ikki and Stella raised their heads.

They noticed it. The earth was shaking slightly.

Stella spoke.

"I wonder what it is? An earthquake?"

But an earthquake wouldn't feel so little. Because the shaking that two of them felt, it felt more like numbness than shaking. And it wasn't just once. At a constant interval, thud. Thud. It was as if the ground was being struck by something with gigantic mass.

"…Could it be, these are the footsteps of a giant?"

What went through Ikki's mind was the scene that he had witnessed thirty minutes ago. The gouged-out earth, the trees that had been uprooted and thrown about. The huge footprints that had been carved into the ground. If it was the creator of the huge footprints, it wouldn't be weird for the earth to tremble every time it walked. Ikki wasn't one who talked about believing in UMAs[3], but certainly after seeing evidence with his own eyes, he thought it was highly likely that it was responsible.

So Ikki stood up.

"I'll go and take a look. Since it's the reason we came here today."

"I'll go too!"

Stella stood up along with him, but….

"Nope."

pow Ikki flicked her on the forehead. With only that, Stella was beaten, and she fell on her back.

"W-Why not!? I want to see the giant too…!"

"There's a one-in-ten-thousand chance that this is a giant, but it's a ferocious animal instead, you might not be able to fight it. So please stay docile, Miss-Person-With-A-Cold."

"Uu…."

Stella puffed up her cheeks and booed like a spoiled child, but she reluctantly abided by the command Ikki made with a serious expression.

Ikki left Stella behind, facing the entrance to the mountain shack. And pressing his ear to the thin wooden door, he tried to guess what was happening outside.

Thud, thud. The sound was quite close. He could tell that the center of the vibrations that followed the steps was also near.

"…Come forth, *Intetsu*."

Speaking words tinged with magic power, Ikki manifested his beloved raven-black sword into his right hand. After that, he took a deep breath and calmed his mind and body—then rammed the door vigorously, leaping outside.

In front of his eyes was—the uninhabited forest, with rain continuing to fall. That scene was the same as when Ikki carried Stella here.

What does this mean?

The sound, the vibration, both certainly existed. But the mass that

had to create them was nowhere to be found. And when he took notice, the sound and vibration had disappeared the moment Ikki leaped outside.

…What is going on?"

Feeling completely confused, Ikki turned back.

And then….

"—Eh?"

He saw saw a rock giant standing in front of the mountain shack at a height of around of five meters.

Ikki had come out from between the legs of that too-huge giant.

N-No way…!

At that excessively unrealistic spectacle, Ikki stood stock still without thinking. But the next moment, he saw an even more unbelievable scene.

Of all things, that giant aimed a huge arm at the mountain shack and swung downward. Yes, aiming at the shack where the sick Stella was!

"S-Stellaaaaa!!!"

In an instant, the mountain shack was literally turned to pieces by that unthinkable mass.

Part 8

"Eek!? W-What!? What in the world is going on!?"

Stella, whom Ikki was cradling, screamed into Ikki's chest.

It was by a hair's breadth. In the instant that the shack was smashed, Ikki invoked Ittou Shura and with his highest speed saved Stella from being crushed.

"Stella, are you alright?"

"Y-Yes. But what in the world…."

"It's exactly what it looks like."

Saying that, Ikki looked toward the rock giant.

"There really was a giant, apparently."

"Wha…."

Stella also turned her gaze that way, and made visual contact with the destructive culprit.

"Somehow, it's not the same as what I was thinking!"

"That's what you care about!?"

But Stella's statement was reasonable. The giant that materialized didn't fit the image of a gigantic human that they had. It was a crude humanoid shape made from many large and small rocks joined together. If one looked at it, one would doubt that it was even a living creature.

However, even if it was probably not a living creature, they understood one thing. This rock giant held hostility and malice

toward Ikki and Stella. The truth was, the giant was once again gathering speed to pursue them, aiming and swinging at them with its huge arm. Ikki, carrying Stella, immediately jumped sideways and avoided the blow. The earth at his back was blasted by the unnatural force. Such a hit would blow even a Blazer away without difficulty.

In that case—there was nothing to do except bring it down before it could hit them.

"Stella, you stay here. Try not to let your body get wet, okay?"

Ikki set Stella down, and confronted the rock giant with *Intetsu* in his hands.

"Are you going to fight? Will you be alright? A sword won't be very effective, you know?"

"I'll be fine. I have a technique for dealing with this kind of opponent, more or less."

Saying that, Ikki raised his left hand closer to his blade, and drew the right hand that held *Intetsu* back with all his strength. It was plainly a stance for thrusting.

But the stone giant didn't care—no, as if it didn't have any will of its own, it lunged with its stone fist mechanically. A monotone attack with such sluggishness couldn't possibly get through the Worst One.

Ikki turned toward the rock giant, and with superhuman strength granted by Ittou Shura, he rushed forward as if flying. He just barely crossed right beside the stone fist as it passed.

—With the right hand that he was drawing back with all his strength, he unleashed a forward stab. A flash of steel that broke the sound barrier took flight.

It wasn't an ordinary thrust. Arm strength, leg strength, charging power—more than Ikki's superhuman body mastery, the vector of all of his power was focused on the point of his sword, a technique that forced out his highest offensive ability. This was the secret technique that boasted the strongest offensive ability among the

Worst One's seven secret swords.

"The first secret sword—*Saigeki!*"[4]

Ikki, who charged as if flying, without decelerating, made his body into a bullet and pierced the rock giant's chest. The impact of the penetration struck the giant's body, and from the huge hole bored into its chest, the giant made from joining rocks collapsed while making a clattering noise. The rocks being joined together fell apart, and returned to rubble having lost the humanoid shape.

"Good!"

But the moment Ikki landed with a small expression of relief….

"Eh…!"

Ikki saw something unbelievable. The crumbling stones were joining back together as if by magnets, and piled up together once again. The wreckage of the smashed giant once again repaired its humanoid shape.

And it wasn't the one giant this time. It was dozens of stone dolls, each as tall as Ikki.

And Ikki saw something even more strange in the middle of that scene. While the stones were attaching to other stones as if by magnetism, there was a presence of a thin, string-like magic power.

Right, this was no rock monster. Someone was using strings of magic power to manipulate rocks like puppetry. Namely, this was—

"A Noble Art…! The enemy is a Blazer! Stella, stay alert on the surroundings!"

"Ikki! Behind you!"

Reacting to Stella's shout, Ikki cleaved off the stone hand that was coming at his back to strike him. With a clang, Ikki's arm fell numb from the recoil of hitting his sword against hard rock. A small crack

appeared in the stone doll.

Like I thought, if I don't use Saigeki, I can't deal with it…!"

But Saigeki had a lethal flaw. It was a charge technique, so it required him to set up an opportunity. As one would expect, in fighting dozens of stone dolls at the same time, there was no leisure time to set up such an opportunity.

"Gah!"

"Ikki!"

He couldn't protect himself, and blood sprayed from Ikki's brow after he took a stone hand to his head. He had warded off the stone hand with Ten'i Muhou, but there were too many enemies, unfortunately. An attack he couldn't parry and cut through had come.

This is bad….

Even though he needed to press on, the end of the time he could use Ittou Shura was coming too quickly. The remaining time was less than thirty seconds. At this rate, he wouldn't be able to win.

What should I…!

But the enemies weren't stopping to let Ikki think. While some surrounded Ikki, five of the rock dolls aimed approached Stella whose body was wrapped in a blanket.

"Stella!"

Ikki yelled out at seeing the scene. But he couldn't do anything other than cry out. He couldn't break out of the enclosure immediately. Stella was still weak. It was too dangerous for her to be attacked by the enemy right now—

"Take this!"

But as Ikki was thinking this, he saw Stella leaping forward and pulverizing the five stone dolls entirely into smithereens using a single strike from *Lævateinn*.

Moreover, not just the danger coming for her personally, she blew away the stone dolls surrounding Ikki with her strong sword, pulverizing them, and hastened toward where Ikki stood after easily defeating them.

"…Uh, somehow this is different from what I think of as a sick person."

"Yeah. I'm also quite surprised. I guess I'm unreasonably powerful, huh?"

Ikki wondered if she should say so about herself, but as expected he couldn't do anything but nod in surprise.

"I was able to move my body thanks greatly to taking a small rest. I'll also fight with you together. For this kind of opponent, my affinity is good."

Certainly so. With Stella's superhuman physical strength, she could cut them, and with only that power she could pulverize the stone dolls. Frankly, Ikki didn't want a sick person to fight no matter how strong she was, but as it was, Ikki's limits in fighting by himself left no room for argument. Having assistance here—at the moment he thought so….

"No no. A sick person shouldn't be doing unreasonable things. Stella-chan～♪"

Suddenly, a frivolous voice that was out of place on a battlefield rang out.

The owner of that voice appeared before Ikki and Stella equally as suddenly, without any warning.

"Vice President Misogi…!"

Part 9

"Hey there, you two. I came to save you, Kouhai-kun."

"That was really fast. I heard we had to wait another half an hour."

"Ahaha～☆ Well, I'm a guy who does the impossible. If you can believe that～♪"

Utakata said so while posing.

Behind Utakata—

ROAR!

Were they targeting everyone that moved?

Together with the bellows of the stone dolls, many stone fists swung down on Utakata's back, aiming at the top of his head. They were hard fists that could even hit Ikki who was clad in Ten'i Muhou. If they hit a human's soft skull directly, they would surely pulverize it in one hit.

"Misogi-san, behind you!"

Ikki cried out at that impending danger.

But Utakata pasted a smile on his face, and didn't move his body one bit at what was happening behind him.

—The stone fists, they blasted away everything above Utakata's neck.

"Wh…!"

"Eek…!"

At that sight, Ikki and Stella widened their eyes and became speechless. With the strength of the stone fists, Utakata's skull had been smashed like a tomato. His small headless body fell into the storm-dampened mud, without moving a twitch. That was the decisive ending that anyone could see.

"Too bad, but that was a trick, you know?"

The next instant, Utakata who should be dead was sitting on the shoulder of the stone doll that had killed him.

"Aha～☆ I tried to tell you about this, didn't I?"

"…Huh? E-Ehhh!?"

Utakata smiled giddily as if nothing had happened. At that sight, Stella raised her voice in confusion. And while Ikki didn't raise his voice as well, he was equally confused. Certainly, he saw Utakata's skull being crushed with his own eyes. The pink brain matter had been scattered, slightly mixed with white bone tissue. The grotesque image was still etched onto the back of his eyelids. It was an unmistakable reality.

It had to be, but then it disappeared. Cause and effect had been wound back. …There was only one power that could induce this kind of unrealistic phenomena.

"A Noble Art—is this an ability from the causation manipulation system?"

"Correct."

Utakata nodded to confirm Ikki's words.

The abilities of Blazers existed along several systems. Ikki's Ittou Shura was an ability of the body enhancement system. Stella's Dragon's Breath was an ability of the elemental manipulation system. And Ayase Ayatsuji's ability to open wounds was an ability

from the conceptual manipulation system. Among those various Blazer superpowers, the system that was the rarest and said to be the strongest was causation manipulation.

"My Noble Art, *Black Box*[5], is an ability that manipulates the outcome of events. Attacking me is always a mistake. That's how it is."

At those words, Ikki thought back to the scene. The first time they met 'Fifty/Fifty' face to face, at that restaurant. At that time, he got rid of Ikki's wound with just a touch. Back then, Ikki wasn't able to comprehend what kind of skill and power he had.

I wasn't injured. He rewrote causation like that?

Understanding that, Ikki shuddered. Ikki had seen many kinds of superpowers, but he didn't remember ever seeing anything like the superpower that Fifty/Fifty held.

This is the superpower that's called the strongest among many Noble Arts?

He couldn't imagine how he would stand against it.

However, at this moment, he was grateful for that extraordinary power. If it was a power this irrational, it would surely make escaping this predicament easy. Ikki and Stella both thought this, but—

Stella spoke.

"With that kind of power it's an easy victory, right? Please lend a hand, Senpai. We'll put an end to this monster right away!"

"Ah, that's impossible."

Utakata flatly rejected Stella's suggestion.

"Eh? W-Why!?"

"The thing is, my Black Box is an ability whose nature is entirely to manipulate outcomes. In other words it's a superpower that makes

even a one percent possibility into certainty. But conversely, it doesn't bring anything into existence. With my strength as an individual person, there's no way it can do anything useful. I can turn a one percent probability into a one hundred percent, but I can't turn a zero percent into a one percent. In other words, you two were breaking these rocks with your swords a moment ago, but there's probably no way I'm the unreasonable type of person who can join in on such a battle. Especially a boy who looks as cute and weak as me? No way, no way."

"So you have that kind of weakness, uh?"

"Yep. If I could manipulate everything and everything, I'd be in the representative battles, you know. But the outcomes that Black Box can manipulate, in the end it's limited to things that are possible. If we get right to the core of it, it's an ability that won't ever let me beat an opponent I can't beat without it."

And Utakata's body was powerless against other people, so the range of that impossibility was particularly wide. Being aware of that, Utakata didn't enter the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival selection battles.

But if that was how it was ….

"Then what did you come here to do!?"

A reasonable question was asked. It would be troubling if people without battle strength increased. Answering Stella's justifiable question, Utakata gave a smile with hidden meaning.

"I came to save you, of course. But just like I said, fighting isn't my domain. My duty is entirely to serve as that girl's navigation."

Saying so, Utakata leaped off from the stone doll with a **boing**.

"—So there it is. I'll leave the rest to you, Touka."

He looked up at the mountain slope.

Before his gaze, on that gentle slope, at the boundary of the mountain forest and the small clearing where the mountain shack

had been built—

"Okay. Thanks for guiding me, Uta-kun."

The girl with glasses and chestnut-colored hair brandished her sword sparkling with golden electricity.

"Toudou-san…."

"It has to be by a hair's breadth, but it's good that you two are safe."

Touka looked at Ikki and Stella's figures, and while her eyes were slightly damp, she showed some relief. And then she tightened her face again.

"Please have a rest, the two of you. I'll handle everything here."

Lowering her body, she prepared to attack the stone dolls that surrounded Ikki and the others.

But Stella turned to Touka and raised her voice to stop Touka.

"Wait, Touka-san! Swords don't work on these things! It's ridiculous to fight these incomprehensible opponents by yourself! I'll also—"

—fight. Stella was going to say this.

"It's fine. I know their weakness."

"Eh…!"

Touka said so.

"It's inorganic matter being manipulated by threads of magic power, instigated by an enemy. This, out of the many types of Device, is a battle technique used by those who favor *Steel Wire Usage*. And for this battle technique, there is an inviolable rule. When operating multiple dolls simultaneously, one doesn't operate everything directly, but uses some dolls to operate others. In other words, one creates linchpins, and uses them for management. The biggest merit

of this battle technique is that while the user conceals himself, he'll attack one-sidedly without risking injury, which makes finding the enemy the number one countermeasure. In that case, the threads that link to him should be made exceedingly subtle. But… if we say it in reverse, as long as we break the hub of those strings, *Steel Wire Usage* won't be able to operate its dolls."

It was a tactic that couldn't be used standing in an arena without places to hide. In other words, it was a way of fighting that student knights weren't accustomed to. However, while Touka was a student knight, she had gone to the scene of crimes many times as a member of the special convention along with Toutokubara, and currently had experience confronting terrorists. Consequently, she had a thorough knowledge of styles that Ikki and Stella were unfamiliar with.

With that knowledge, her eyes—

"Found it."

Among the dozens of crawling stone dolls, she exposed the one body operating all of the dolls in an instant. And in that instant, Touka's body disappeared.

No, not disappeared. Before anyone could see it, she pierced the enemy line—she plunged toward the hub that she had discovered.

Shippu Jinrai. [6]

Stimulating her muscles with the power of lightning, it was Touka's Noble art that increased her performance to its limit. That speed, it was undoubtedly like lightning. The stone dolls couldn't react to the abrupt change in situation at all. Simply put, wooden puppets certainly could only be caught flat-footed—

"—Raikiri!"

Within that instant, everything was decided.

With the speed of a flash, a blade of plasma was unsheathed, and the hub was bisected with a single stroke.

Then came a blast of air, and all the stone dolls on the field were demolished. After a blast that appeared to send everything flying ended, there was not a single enemy remaining.

Part 10

There was no sign that the dolls were being recreated again. The enemy who hadn't been found yet seemed to have withdrawn after the hub was destroyed.

"Amazing…."

Standing alone, Stella voiced her astonishment at Touka's performance.

"It's amazing that she recognized the enemy's weak point immediately, but more than that, Touka-san's balance of superpower and sword technique is very good."

"That's true."

Ikki had the same opinion.

And also, that the strength of Raikiri, Touka Toudou, was probably based on her conviction. The breadth of Touka's practical ability was vast. Given lightning's high offensive power, it wasn't only used for normal attacks. From strengthening physical ability with lightning to observing the psychology of others to manage them, her swordsmanship was born from that. Whether it was superpower or swordsmanship, she displayed them at an extremely high dimension of skill, and brought them together at an equally high dimension.

As for how good that balance was, Ikki who was extremely specialized in swordsmanship of course, in his eyes, believed that Touka was higher ranked than Stella. Stella herself probably perceived Touka's strength which she didn't match.

"Honestly, I've been considerably enlightened."

It was unusual for her, to cough out such a laudable statement. But her expression was slightly stiff. To Ikki, the reason was understandable. She had realized it. At the present time, the Crimson Princess didn't reach Raikiri's level.

A-Rank and B-Rank. According to that rating, Stella's potential was definitely higher. In another year, Stella should certainly surpass Rakiri. But at least right now, if the two of them fought… eight or nine times out of ten, Touka would win. Stella herself was aware of that, and probably for that reason, her face was stiff.

And to Stella….

"Stella-san."

Touka, who had finished up the dolls, ran up to her.

"I-I heard that you collapsed. Are you okay!?"

With Touka's entirely flared-up expression, she looked like a completely different person from the dignified one who beat the dolls so easily just a while ago. Becoming more pale than Stella who was sick, she was acutely worried about how badly Stella had collapsed.

"Eh, ah, yes. I'm much better after resting a little."

Therefore Stella also laughed and answered Touka to set her at ease, but—Touka pressed her own forehead against Stella's, and immediately saw through that lie.

"Aren't you extremely feverish!? You're not alright at all! And despite that, your body is this wet… what will you do if your cold gets worse?"

"It can't be helped. The mountain shack was attacked and destroyed."

In answer, Stella pointed out the wreckage of the crushed mountain shack. Touka's face, when she saw that, clouded over in worry.

"Uta-kun. Is there another emergency shelter anywhere nearby?"

"Nope. But there's supposed to be a cavern a little bit north from here."

"In that case, let's take refuge there for now. We can't let a sick person be exposed to the rain. And if we don't give Kurogane-kun treatment too…."

With those words, Touka picked up Stella's body suddenly.

"Now, let's be off, Stella-san."

"Wha-wha! Wait, carry, don't carry me! It's embarrassing!"

"That's no good. A sick person should be obedient."

With the gentleness of a mother admonishing her child, but using words that exerted a forceful pressure, she silenced Stella, and Touka proceeded to carry Stella away.

Seeing that back, Utakata who was standing alone murmured something that only Ikki could hear.

"Both of Touka's parents died from illness, you know. That's why she's been unusually persistent about managing people's physical condition since the old days. It's better not to go against Touka when she's like that. Because if you quibble and throw a tantrum, you'll get a spanking."

"Has Vice President Misogi also gotten one?"

"Her slaps on the wrist are amazing. She's a prodigy for that kind of thing."

It seemed to be the case. Having experienced the argument at the student council room, it seemed to Ikki that the relationships between mother and troublesome children hadn't changed from the old days.

"Now then, Kouhai-kun, can you walk by yourself? If it's impossible, I'll lend you my shoulder?"

Utakata made the suggestion from worry about the extreme fatigue

Ikki got after using Ittou Shura. But Ikki calmly shook his head.

"No, I'm fine. If it's just walking."

"In that case, splendid. Hurry and follow me."

The party coming together this way, they presently escaped to the cavern in order to fend off the rain.

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"Ha ha ha. I only intended to meddle with the trial run for the new hub a little, but what an outrageous retaliation I got bit by. Sheesh."

In a certain place in Japan. Even though it was still noon, inside a dark room that was like a shady hangout for drifters. There, a tall man, while sinking his waist deeply into a couch, let out a sigh and gave a faint smile.

"Dear me, as expected of the famous Raikiri. Wooden puppets weren't even worth mentioning, I guess."

"Such a harsh smell. Was your arm burnt?"

Standing behind the tall man, a shadow asked him while looking down at him as if in scorn.

"It's already well-done."

The tall man, to the question, showed his left arm. The left arm of the man who was controlling the stone dolls had been burnt by Raikiri's high-voltage current that had flowed through the threads, and flesh had been scorched off. The degree of that damage was fierce, such that even recovery in a capsule would probably not restore it perfectly.

Despite that, where were the tall man's cries of pain? He was happily singing Touka's praises.

"Thanks to that, my left hand has become useless, hasn't it?"

"It's because you did a useless thing right before festival eve, you

fool."

"I can't say anything in response, I guess. Ha ha ha."

"I'm an ordinary student, so I don't know the organization's plans, but you're someone right beside the organization, aren't you? With strategy in front of you, shouldn't you hold back on doing careless things?"

"Well, that's true, but I can't help it if waiting around isn't fun, you know. It's not enjoyable. That's not a good thing. I hate things that aren't fun. It's because I'm a Pierrot[7]. I always have to be laughing. Whether virtuous or corrupt, a Pierrot's style is to be fun, wouldn't you say?"

"You words are as difficult to understand as ever."

"Ha ha ha. Thank you for saying so. Being a wet blanket is also a strong point of a Pierrot who reads the heart of others."

Answering with a voice that didn't hide its frivolity, the tall man moved his the fingers of his right hand nimbly with a swish. As he did so, the scorched left arm fell off beautifully at the shoulder as if being cut by sharp cutlery. Because the area at the shoulder had been cauterized, there was no bleeding.

"Ah, do you want some? It's well-done, but…."

"I don't need it. You might as well feed it to that cat."

"Ha ha ha. She'll cry again if you don't call her a sphinx properly."

"Even if you attach wings with glue, a cat is a cat."

At the curt reply from the shadows behind him, the tall man sighed and spoke his innermost thoughts. Sheesh, that one didn't have youthful dreams, huh?

"Oh, by the way, the Crimson Princess you're infatuated with was also at the scene. Her facial color wasn't good at all, so I wonder if she had a cold?"

"I wouldn't know about such things."

"Oh? You're not concerned? I heard that you came here to meet her."

"True. That's the reason I'm accompanying you bastards on your blood sports. But if her physical condition is damaged to the point that she can't be in the tournament, then I say the Crimson Princess is only a girl of that level."

With a voice that traveled clearly in the dark, the words of the man answering contained no lie. Sensing that, the tall man clearly felt that the compatibility with the shadow that was scorning him was bad. Sheesh, this man was terrible at banter.

"Well well, you're quite cold, aren't you? Nowadays, women won't spare a glance for men who don't make small talk, you know?"

"Tell your nonsense to a mirror, clown."

Perhaps the man in the shadows also felt that their compatibility was bad. He spoke as if spitting out the words, and left the place.

Staring at the back that was melted into the darkness, the tall man again let out a sigh —and said….

"Really, not cute at all. I'd prefer he share his younger brother's simplicity."

Part 11

After that, the rain continued to fall for an unexpectedly long time. It was around three hours. With that impact, in the end the sun had started to set by the time Ikki and the others could come down from the mountain. At some point, the clouds what were sending furious rain disappeared before anyone noticed, and the sky became perfectly clear of clouds, and the scene fell under a beautiful red hue.

Honestly, there was really something wrong with Japan's weather recently. As all of them thought that, they headed back to the training lodge. Along the trail, Stella who Ikki was carrying once again asked something of Touka.

"Hey, Touka-san. The one who manipulated the rock dolls from before, is it okay to let him get away?"

In the end, after fleeing the rain, they were confined to the entrance of the cavern the entire time, so they couldn't find the true identity of the enemy who manipulated the rock dolls and attacked Ikki and the others. Stella seemed displeased about that. Well, that feeling was something everyone in the situation shared. Since they were going back and leaving the fundamental question about the giant behind, they couldn't erase the feeling of leaving things undone. However—

"…Well, if we were able to catch that person, we would've wanted to do so, but it seems that's a bit impossible."

"Why?"

"When I demolished the hub, I measured the distance to the practitioner using Raikiri's lightning attack on the threads, but it would be too far to go and catch that person."

"How far away would that be?"

"At an estimate, it would be about a hundred kilometers."

"Bu, **cough cough**!"

At the dubious distance, even if the location of the training camp was within the Tokyo metropolis area, Stella choked over her surprise. Certainly, they couldn't go that far to make an arrest.

"Haa. I was shocked by that. Can a steel wire user manipulate dolls from that far away?"

"No. Ordinarily, it would be impossible. There was a B-Rank steel wire user in the special assembly of Blazers I was on the same team with, but the distance that person could freely manipulate dolls was around five hundred meters."

She pointed out that fact. In other words, at that time, it was an abnormal thing directing those threads. Referring to that, Touka's expression stiffened slightly.

"Therefore… it may be me who'd have to be rescued before getting to confront him."

"If that's the case, it would be wise not to chase too far."

It was too dangerous to charge in without a plan against that kind of unknown opponent. Hearing Touka's words, Ikki understood her judgment. Nonetheless, Stella seemed to have a personality that was dissatisfied over leaving an enemy alone, and cleared her throat.

"But quitting without knowing anything, it's somehow unsatisfying."

"Since we relayed the information to the chairman through Toutokubara-san, if a decision is needed, I think the chairman will take measures. Moreover, since that person suffered wounds, he probably won't come here again."

You said something amazing without hesitation just now, Toudou-san.

It was amazing for a steel wire user to manipulate dolls form a

hundred kilometer away, but for Touka to cast a lightning strike against an enemy over a hundred kilometers away was also extraordinary, after all.

After that, while they spent the walk exchanging a childish conversation, they continued back through the evening. The way was muddy from rain, but they were Hagun's distinguished student knights. Nobody tripped clumsily. Since Ikki had gotten enough sleep in the cavern, the fatigue from Ittou Shura didn't drag him down, and his walking while carrying Stella was easy. Consequently, the march progressed as smoothly as one would suppose, and all of them managed to reach the foot of the mountain where the lodge buildings were before sundown.

"Ah! Hey there, everyone! Welcome back!"

Their return was greeted by Renren and Saijou, who were waiting for them outside.

"Stella-chan, I heard you collapsed? How terrible, right?"

"Sorry to worry you. It was the first time I had a cold, so I didn't even know I had one."

"You could rest if you were just tired, but you're an extremely energetic person, right? You made holes in the ground with the badminton birdie. Thinking isn't something you can do with your body, right?"

"…Somehow, I feel like you're calling me an idiot."

…She's really not like what I think of as a sick person, after all.

Why was this girl hitting a badminton birdie as if she was playing tennis? Somehow, he had the sense that Stella would win through the selection battles as usual even with a cold.

"Having fought a giant while your partner was collapsed, you look like you've thoroughly suffered, huh?"

Suddenly, Ikki heard sympathetic words from Saijou.

"Ha ha ha… well, I'm used to being unlucky, so I'll be fine."

"I heard you were injured, but is it serious?"

"I was only wounded a little, so no. I'm alright."

"I see."

Nodding, Saikou took out a small bottle from his pocket and handed it to Ikki.

"What's this?"

"My family is a lineage of doctors. This is an ointment made from a secret formula. It's effective on bruises, so you should go apply it."

"Is that so? Okay, thanks. I'll use it later."

Ikki stated his thanks for Saijou's kindness with a smile. Then from behind him, Utakata and the others….

"Homo."

"Is that why you don't attack me even when I'm only in my underwear in the student council room!?"

"W-W-What stupid things are you two saying!? That was camaraderie! Probably, surely!"

"Why does even Touka-san seem halfway unsure…?"

Ikki heard a conversation that gave him a headache somewhat as if he had been hit on the head.

"Sorry that my colleagues are so noisy. Well, that's how they always are, so don't mind them."

"Ha ha ha."

Saijou-san has a strong mind.

This person might also be wise in the ways of the world.

"Haa. I'm tired from walking the entire time today. And my stomach is empty. Hey, hey, Touka, let's all have barbeque before we go back."

"Ah, that would be great! I didn't eat much at noon, so I want to have some meat."

"I agree!"

Stella and Renren latched onto Utakata's suggestion, but Touka shook her head with full turns of her neck.

"No way. Stella-san is sick, you know. She has to go to a doctor first."

"Ehhhhh…."

"Stella-chan looks completely lively, so she's probably fine—"

"Yeah. I'm alright."

"See, she says she's fine. As an upperclassman and as the student council president, shouldn't you respect her independence!?"

"Even if you split hairs, no is no. If we don't take a cold seriously, it can be dreadful. In addition, Stella-san is in an important season, so if an unlikely emergency happened, it would be a disaster."

"Ooh…."

grrrrr

Stella's stomach, resting on Ikki's back, made a complaining noise. It seemed that her appetite really was coming back. In addition, the heat he felt from her body had also fallen considerably compared to the time they were in the mountain shack. Perhaps she had nearly completely recovered from the cold. It was a staggeringly superhuman recovery power, but if it was Stella, he couldn't say it was impossible.

"…Toudou-san. It's certainly true that we should go to a hospital, but not eating something when you're hungry is also bad for the

body, you know. The body wants energy to fight the illness, after all."

"Ikki…!"

Renren shouted out.

"Ooh! That's right, that's right! Kurogane-kun said something good just now!"

"Hmm. That's true, I guess…. …I think she'll have the chance to eat meat while convalescing, but… I understand. Then let's take Stella-san to the hospital and get her some medication, and after that we'll go to an all-you-can-eat yakiniku[8] place. If we eat first, we won't be in time to get her treated before the hospital closes."

Utakata cheered.

"Thanks, Touka! Yahoo! Meat!"

"Misogi-senpai! Let's go to Jo●en![9]"

"Alright, leave making the reservation to me!"

"Stop! I said we'll go to an all-you-can-eat place!"

This bunch of people is as lively as ever.

But suddenly, Ikki noticed that someone was missing.

"By the way, where is Toutokubara-san?"

Renren blinked.

"Kanata-senpai? She went to receive a guest who just came."

Saijou also spoke up.

"Hmm, now that you mention it, I forgot that there was a message I had to deliver. Actually, just a while ago, someone came here to visit you, Kurogane."

"Me?"

"Yeah, it seems he came when he found out you were here after going to the academy."

Who could it be? Ikki tilted his head in confusion. Especially to pursue him all the way to Okutama. Honestly, he couldn't think of any acquaintance who would want to meet him that much.

"Saijou-san, what is the person's name?"

"I think it was—"

After thinking about it for a short while, Saijou seemed to recall.

"Ah, that's right. He gave his name as Azaka."

At the name that was announced, Ikki's expression stiffened. And at the same time—

"Oh, he's here, he's here. Finally, we meet."

A man's cloying voice came to Ikki's ears. Turning his gaze, he saw Kanata Toutokubara leading the person she had probably been receiving.

"It's been such a long time~ Ikki-kun. Ha ha ha."

An obese middle-aged man wrapped in a red suit, smiling with an Ebisu-like face.

Ikki knew him. He had met him several times during the period he lived in his parents' home.

"Ikki, who's this old man…?"

Perhaps Stella sensed something serious through his back as he carried her. She asked Ikki timidly. In response, Ikki lowered Stella from his back, and answered.

"This is… Mamoru Azaka-san. The current head of the Kurogane house's branch family."

Just from knowing what kind of person this was, Stella received all

she needed to understand the situation. Stirring up, Stella whose demeanor became like a menacing cat faced the visitor with her hackles raised.

Kanata, who had guided Azaka, expressed confusion at the mood that had grown dangerous as if the air had started to sting,

"Excuse me, is something wrong?"

But Azaka himself, who had been receiving hostility one-sidedly….

"Ha ha ha. Please don't make that scary face. I don't like it either, you know? After all, I went as far as to show up in Okutama for a good-for-nothing like yourself, right?"

Without feeling the timid situation at all, he pasted a smile on that uselessly grateful face, and spat out aggressive words. At those bluntly contemptuous words, even the people of the student council who didn't know what was going on felt the distinct animosity that the visitor was directing toward Ikki. This person was Ikki's enemy.

In that case, for Touka who considered the feelings of her colleagues, she had to fire back.

"You, what are you doing? That way of speaking, isn't it rude?"

She immediately turned an intimidating gaze toward the discourteous visitor.

"Well well, if it isn't the famous Raikiri-san. Good afternoon to you. Ah, or is it late enough for good evening? I heard your conversation, you know. It seems you went to save Ikki-kun, didn't you? No, I'm sorry, I should describe it as an upright adherence to your duty. As a representative of my family, I humbly apologize. Exactly as I said."

"Wh-Who would want an apology like that—"

"I'm truly very sorry～"

Watching Azaka speak with Touka this way, it seemed he wasn't listening to Touka's words at all. And it seemed he was one-sidedly

showing his contempt for Ikki all over again. To that excessively conspicuous malice, Touka was so bewildered she became speechless. The other student council officers were the same.

And in the brief period of silence that fell, Akaza raised his face without a moment's delay.

"Well, let's please leave that aside for now, and get down to business immediately. I can't bear the many mosquitos here in the mountains. Ha ha ha. The reason I came here today, it's because the head of the ethics committee for the League's Japanese branch has something very important to communicate to Ikki-kun."

The point of the conversation appeared. Though Akaza's expression had a smile, his eyelids were narrowed into slits, and the light coming out of them was dim. That his important matter was worthless was evident even without listening to it.

But if it wasn't heard, the conversation wouldn't progress. Therefore Ikki prompted him to continue.

"I wonder what he has to say after all this time?"

"Ha ha ha. Well, it's still early for you to ask what he has to say beyond this. Here, here. Today's evening publications."

What Akaza handed over were several newspaper articles. What exactly was written there, and what did they have to do with Ikki? While feeling a strange apprehension, Ikki opened one of the newspapers up, and—

There, a photograph of Ikki and Stella exchanging a kiss against a background of many trees was published.

Part 12

Overwhelmed by surprise, Stella glued her round eyes to the photo.

"Ikki, th-this is…!"

There was no mistake. In the school, in a spot in the forest that Ikki and Stella always used for training. It was a photograph of one of the times they exchanged a kiss.

That picture was published on a page of every one of the evening papers that Akaza had handed over.

Right—everything had been cleanly exposed. The relationship between the two of them. To everyone within the school.

"What a great picture, isn't it? It has your faces just right. Even though it was at night, cameras today are dreadful. Ha ha ha. Maybe you can't tell since we're in the mountains? That the public is in an uproar right now? Laying hands on a state guest, it's an unprecedented scandal."

"W-Wait a second!"

Stella snatched the newspaper and shouted angrily.

"W-What is this article!? What is this nonsense!?"

Screaming that, she pointed at the front-page stories with merry words that exacerbated the seriousness of the situation:
『The Man Who Stole a Princess's Purity』
『King of Vermillion Outraged』
『International Problem Brewing Between Japan and Vermillion?』

And there, criticisms of the person called Ikki Kurogane were

published, supplied by the Kurogane family. That his behavior was bad in the old days, that he was a problem child who troubled the Kurogane house, that he was a person with a problematic personality, and so on. Furthermore, that his philandering was excessively bad, that he continued licentious associations with several girls besides Stella, going even that far.

What a bunch of utter lies. But in these articles, those lies were listed as if they were true.

「Ikki Kurogane was a boy with a notoriously problematic personality in the past.」

Stella, seeing such a statement, couldn't help but fall silent. However, to the enraged Stella, Azaka put on a grin that stretched across his entire face.

"No, no. All of that is true, you know. Even though you weren't aware, Princess. That's natural. I'm not such a good-for-nothing person that I'd spread rumors. However, we know what kind of person he was in the past. …It truly pains me to speak ill of a relative, but this boy, he has been a scoundrel since the old days, even committing assault, theft, and blackmail. Look, there should even be comments from victims published there. Ha ha ha."

"Aren't all of those things fabrications!? That he's not the kind of person who'd do those things, anyone who knows him even a little bit would get that!"

"Ha ha ha. Well, however you think of it, Princess, the truth is this has become the news. How the general public will receive it is clear, no? The reality is, after receiving this information, the voices in the League objecting about Ikki-kun's qualities as a knight will become stronger. Therefore, the League's Japanese branch will hold an emergency inquiry regarding this matter. And there, Ikki-kun's qualities as a knight will be comprehensively inspected, and if he is judged unfit, the Japanese branch will send the League's headquarters a request for Ikki-kun's expulsion. …Today, I'm here to take Ikki-kun in for that inquiry."

Stella's understanding solidified at Akaza's attitude. This wasn't an

ordinary scandal—Ikki's family, the Kurogane house, had conceived a clearly spiteful attack on him. They were using this scandal for maximum effect, and attacking Ikki's status as a knight. By taking advantage of the scandal, they would revoke Ikki's status as a knight that was managed by League's headquarters, and impose expulsion on him. In order to suppress the failure who didn't act in accordance with the will of the Kurogane main house.

"This is is a formal hearing called by the ethics committee. If they find you unacceptable… ha ha ha. Well, Ikki-kun's situation is growing very bad. …Of course, you'll come along without a fight, right? Ikki-kun. Ha ha ha."

Akaza put both hands on Ikki's shoulders, and announced it with a syrupy tone.

In contrast, after Ikki was silent for a short while….

"I understand."

As if resolving himself, he answered that way. Standing upright, he returned Akaza's gaze with eyes ready to take the challenge.

Stella perceived it in Ikki's stare. A powerfully malicious ordeal like they had never encountered before was drawing near the person she loved.

References

1. ↑ *Ebisu*: A Japanese deity of luck. His face is fat and jovial.
2. ↑ *Kouhai*: A junior in an organization; the opposite of a *senpai*. In this case, an underclassman.
3. ↑ *UMA*: Unidentified Mysterious Animal, a common Japanese term for cryptid.
4. ↑ *Saigeki*, 犀撃: "Rhinocerous Strike".
5. ↑ *Black Box*: This uses the kanji 絶対的不確定, *zettaiteki fukakutei* ("Absolute Uncertainty").
6. ↑ *Shippu Jinrai*, 疾風迅雷: "Lightning Speed".
7. ↑ *Pierrot*: A clown, named for a stock character in various types of art and performance.
8. ↑ *Yakiniku*: Japanese grilled meat, derived from Korean cuisine.
9. ↑ *Jo●en*: Jojoen, 叙々苑, a high-class chain of yakiniku restaurants across Japan, with many locations in Tokyo.

Chapter 3: Worst One Under Siege

Part 1

"Eh~, everyone, I sincerely thank you for accepting this call for an emergency meeting even though we're so busy today~. As for this meeting today, even though Ikki Kurogane-kun here today is an adult who's gone through his coming of age, he has produced as absurd a scandal as having an illicit sexual relationship with a state guest, and voices that call his accountability and ethics as an adult into question have risen in the Japanese branch. He is receiving various privileges that are not bestowed upon student knights or ordinary fifteen-year-old boys. For this reason, we greatly demand a sense of responsibility balancing those privileges. Accordingly, the Ethics Committee is also considering this view, and for this occasion, we have concluded that there is an opportunity to formally and closely examine whether Ikki Kurogane-kun's qualities as a knight is under question. Though we know you are all busy, please favor us with your understanding and cooperation."

The skyscraper of the League of Mage-Knight Nations, Japanese Branch. The ethics directors of student knights, of mage-knights, was on the tenth underground floor there, as was the section controlled by the Ethics Committee that petitioned for things like disciplinary action and expulsion when necessary, or act as military police.

At a room in that section, the chairman of the Ethics Committee, Akaza, bowed his head toward the gathered middle-aged gentlemen, and he made a stiff and smug smile at Ikki Kurogane who stood there with upright honesty.

"—Well, let us open this inquiry meeting. Everyone. Please take your seats."

But there was no chair anywhere near Ikki. Only the gentlemen sat

down. It was plainly harassment. Ikki had been forced to remain standing for this meeting that would last how many hours?

Well, it was expected, and he wasn't so poorly trained that he would surrender at that degree of discomfort, so it was no big deal, but….

…At any rate, the air in this place is really stagnant, huh?

Ikki surveyed the indoor room that had practically no illumination. Inside the room, a U-shaped table was set up as if to surround him, and the suited gentlemen were sitting, beginning with Akaza. Three people in front of Ikki. To his left and right, one person each. Five in total. Because everyone there was dressed in red suits, Ikki knew they were all people of the Ethics Committee.

"No need to be so uptight. Despite what I said in the beginning, every one of us here is your ally."

Akaza mocked Ikki who felt like probing the Ethics Committee's combat ability.

"This inquiry meeting is not a place for censuring you. We will not just properly hear the excuse from you who created an unprecendented scandal in carrying out an illicit sexual relationship with a state guest, but also the explanation kindly given by your father the director. In other words, there is no one here but your allies. Isn't that right, everyone?"

"Indeed. Everyone here believes it would be a pity to decide on expulsion whatever your explanation is. Because somehow, you've pushed yourself to appear in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival so extremely hard that you'll make it with just another step. We don't want to nullify such tenacity."

"…Thank you very much."

How dare Akaza say such insincere things so unreservedly? It was admirable, in a sense.

"Well then, Ikki-kun, now that you understand that we're your allies, first of all let us review the facts. It's true that Ikki-kun and the second princess of the Vermillion Empire, Miss Stella

Vermillion, are in a relationship, correct?"

"Yes, that's true."

"He he he. It's good to be honest. When did that association begin, more or less?"

"It began at the commencement of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival selection battles. The night of my first battle."

It wasn't like he was telling a lie. Therefore Ikki answered honestly. However, every person on the committee made a scornful expression.

"Oh, you started the socializing extremely quickly, didn't you."

"Hmph. Youngsters today are indeed like this. Doing terribly rash and blind things."

"In our youth, we spent more time building a mutual relationship first, after all."

"When it comes to young people today, they're all like monkeys, I see. Why do they do these things that end in unintended pregnancy and shotgun weddings?"

"Truly lamentable."

They were talking entirely like Ikki and Stella were having premarital sex. Of course, Ikki had done no such thing. Up to this day, they had been socializing as nothing more than a platonic couple. That was what he and Stella decided for their relationship after serious consideration. They understood that her position, being a princess, was very delicate. Therefore this kind of false accusation was infuriating.

"Sorry to be rude, but we haven't been doing anything like what you and the newspapers—"

"Ikk-kun, Ikki-kun. I know that you have things you want to say, but please speak only when given permission, okay? If you don't, you'll give a bad impression, you know. He he he."

"…Please forgive my rudeness."

His statement was interrupted by Akaza, and Ikki reluctantly bowed his head in apology.

The man with a goatee who was sitting at Ikki's left side and looking at him hatefully asked him a question with a rather curt tone.

"Hmph. Since it looks like you want to say something no matter what, I'll ask a question. You didn't think about how absurd it is to have an illicit sexual relationship with another country's princess, right? It's so extremely dangerous that it's capable of creating an international problem. I understand that you're at the age where you have too much sexual desire, but your sense in choosing a partner to have fun with wasn't working, right?"

"My intentions in associating with Stella was not to play around. We love each other sincerely."

"Hmph. You really are a child."

"He he he. I was like that as well, you know. The girl that's your first love seems like a once-in-a-lifetime partner. It's so good to be young, yes."

"I'll take your word for it, but both Stella and I are already adults who've had our coming of age ceremonies. We even have the right to marry. Wouldn't it be quite normal to think seriously about our mutual relationship?"

"Hair-splitting, are you? Such an extremely rebellious attitude."

"You, that kind of manner isn't good."

"It'll make a bad impression, I said. He he he."

Akaza filled something in upon a sheet of paper close at hand.

That sight, and seeing the middle-aged people surrounding him with the attitude of not listening to his points—

I knew it would be like this, but… what a cruel farce.

Ikki sighed in his heart. While questioning Ikki's accountability as an adult, they were completely refusing to recognize the legal rights Ikki has as an adult. Rather than treating Ikki as an adult, it was only a scene for their own convenience. Those indications from the people of the Ethics Committee made Ikki convinced. This was not a place where his qualities as a knight was being carefully examined. This place, it had already concluded that Ikki Kurogane does not have the nature of a knight, and it was definitely an inquisition to collect material for reinforcing that conclusion.

…Well, I already understand that after seeing the evening paper, but….

In the first place, the things they were saying were weird from the beginning. That he had made a lover from a princess who was studying abroad. Well, it was certainly a scandalous story. One could say it would be natural for there to be a media uproar. But it was strange that this would lead to an inquiry on Ikki's qualities as a knight.

As per Ikki's assertion not long ago, neither he nor Stella were children. They were a man and woman whose right to marry was legally recognized. Their love was permitted under the law, so to speak. More than Ikki and Stella's feelings being settled, if for example Stella's father, the king of the Vermillion Empire, displayed discomfort at the matter, that was entirely something to be discussed with the person himself. Despite that, it hadn't become like that, but instead it became a scandal that third-parties were mistakenly clamoring about, and all of it had been collected on pages so that they can be turned into questions on Ikki's qualities as a knight. It was obviously strange.

Why did something so strange develop like that? The reason was simple. It was none other than the existence of something manipulating arbitrary expectations into turmoil.

He's doing roundabout things as usual.

However, Ikki also knew that they were not being so roundabout because they were fond of it. All student knights were members of

the League of Mage-Knight Nations. Besides deterrence against war, by enrolling knights into a nationalistic organization, it simplified the legal process for travel, and allowed them to help each other immediately in the case of emergency. Or in the unlikely event of a war breaking out, it allowed for proxy wars smoothly conducted between the knights of different countries under the supervision of the League and so forth. There were various pretexts, but anyway, it wasn't something relevant to what was going on at the moment.

What was important was that the qualifications of mage-knights who were enrolled as student knights at the League headquarters, those qualifications could not by suspended or revoked by the various national governments around the world and their branches arbitrarily. Even Itsuki Kurogane the Japanese branch director, even Akaza the Ethics Committee chairman who acted as military police, were not entitled to such power. Therefore they had no choice but to use a circuitous means.

Yes, like instigating the Hunter against Ikki Kurogane a year ago.

By persecuting Ikki behind closed doors, they were trying to cause Ikki to speak self-incriminating words from his own mouth. Even if they couldn't get get that, to have him show bad behavior. Bad attitude. Bad expression. Rough tone. Anything was fine. At any rate, they were stocking up on information about Ikki's giving bad impressions, to support an application for expulsion that they would submit to the League's headquarters. That was the aim of Akaza and the others. Ikki could tell.

In that case, more than repeating the same assertion, it was safer not to let things slip from his tongue and be held against him.

Ikki understood that, but he—

"Whether you all have good or bad beliefs, it's fine with me either way. I sincerely love Stella, and she truly loves me. I know that. Therefore I don't believe our actions were a mistake, and we won't tell others that it was a mistake."

He thoroughly refused to back down from his antagonistic posture. Naturally. Ikki knew very well how much he loved that charming

girl. When they held each other, when they kissed, he knew what kind of wonderful smiles they showed. That being the case, he would not declare that it was a scandal. He would not say that it was a mistake. If there was anyone who tried to force him to say it was a mistake, sticking to silence in front of that person would not be what a man does. That was why Ikki came to this inquiry.

—I said so to Stella.

No matter who he was in front of, he would say he loved Stella proudly. So he wouldn't retreat. He wouldn't stay silent. If the men before him had no intention of listening to his opinion all along, that was perfectly fine. It wasn't like he was thinking of getting approval from people like them. Simply put, he was not going to stop asserting it.

Because this feeling was the one thing he would never lie about.

Part 2

Ikki had been taken away by the Ethics Committee, and he had been confined for three days. Stella was like a volcano just about to erupt. Constantly grimacing with eyebrows drawn in displeasure, her hair scattering incandescence in sparks. There were many students who were curious about the scandal, but they were too scared of the pressure to approach, and no one around her could get close. Even in the dining hall that was crowded with people during lunch time, no one sat at the seats near Stella. It was quite natural, the person herself was in no state of mind to deal with such trivial things, but…

"Even though you managed to finally recover from your cold, you're giving out such an extreme killing intent, Stella-chan."

The one who spoke to Stella without hesitation and sat down next to her was a tall and thin beauty, Nagi Arisuin. From a distance, voices cried out things like 「Aah, Nagi-sama is doing such a dangerous thing….」. That was probably his fans.

But however much she was irritated, even Stella would not injure her friends by venting her anger. Simply put, the manner and speech became as rough as usual.

"…Of course I am. Did you think I'd be smiling while they write that nonsense as they please?"

When Stella said "that", she meant the evening paper from that day. That paper which put down tons of lies about Ikki, and wrote herself like some dimwitted girl who was tricked by a villain. Just remembering that page made her guts boil.

"I heard about how harsh it was, but this country's level of mass media is really the lowest, right?"

Stella spat those words out, and….

"Nya ha ha, my ears are burning."

One more person, a female student wearing glasses, sat down on Stella's other side while making an unpleasant face.

"Kagami…."

"Can I join you too?"

"Go ahead. I don't really know why, but this is the only place that's open."

"Nya ha ha, thanks."

Putting down on the table her tray with a lunch sandwich on top, Kagami Kusakabe continued her words with an apologetic expression.

"Well, it's natural for Stella-chan to get mad. For Vermillion's princess to find a lover while studying abroad, it would be a scandal, you know? But for a reporter to disregard a princess's judgment and treat the association between two people as a scandal, it's too rude. This is very much an international problem, you know. …Well, the information would come out understanding that much, probably."

"Oh my? What are you saying?"

"…Well, I have just a biiiiit of a lot of influence with the local newspaper reporters, and was able to use my connections to do some investigation, but as expected the Ethics Committee seems to be exerting some mighty pressure worthy of the organization. It's creating the negative image that the news emphasizing the Vermillion imperial princess's scandal is based on. It's just talk between us here, but it seems the Ethics Committee used their power to bully their way into inserting a special bulletin into the King of Knights formal performance broadcast."

"…Because the KOK is completely bound to the League, they can do such bullying, right? I see."

There was no way to insert a special bulletin into the world's biggest form of entertainment. Even the occurrence of a shocking death would not give a news event that kind of priority. This kind of move was like thrusting a dagger at their throats. No doubt, it was something inevitable. And that truth given by Kagami, it was evidence of more than just the Ethics Committee, but also a flanking attack from Itsuki Kurogane seriously trying to snatch away Ikki's qualifications as a knight.

"Unbelievable…."

Knowing their seriousness, Stella couldn't stop that word from coming out.

"Ikki isn't just some student! Just to corner him like that, why does Ikki's father, the Japanese branch director, go that far!?"

Moreover, what the heck kind of advantage was there in this? If he denounced Ikki to this extent, wouldn't it also harm the reputation of the Kurogane house? What was the reason for cornering Ikki this far despite that issue?

"Even though Ikki is his son, why?"

"Because he is that kind of father."

The voice that answered came from the opposite side of the school cafeteria table. It came from directly in front of Stella, not unlike the chime of a bell, a small and sweet voice. It was—

"Because he is that kind of man, he did this. And it isn't just what you mentioned."

"Shizuku…."

"Honestly speaking, what Father is thinking, why he has such prejudice against Onii-sama, I can't understand any of it, because that crookedness is beyond my comprehension. But that is why nothing he does seems strange."

While announcing such cold facts dispassionately, Shizuku laid her tray with her Japanese meal set lunch on the table. And she sat down at the table in front of Stella.

While Stella was a little bit hesitant to speak to her when she was like that, Shizuku still spoke as usual. Because Shizuku hadn't shown her face once after the match with Raikiri, Stella hadn't spoken with her since then—

"Umm, Shizuku…. I'm sorry. We haven't talked to you about the relationship."

Stella knew how strongly Shizuku loved her brother. Therefore there was no helping it, whatever kind of attack she'd receive from Shizuku. Stella was content to face it with resignation.

But Shizuku's response was alarmingly light.

"It's not like there's a problem, you know. I mean, I knew about it."

"Eh?"

"I can tell with a glance, you know. That the relationship between you two changed after the night of Onii-sama's debut battle. Isn't that right, Alice?"

"Ha ha, Well, it was delightfully easy to tell."

"Yep, yep. Heck, even I could figure it out."

"Wow…."

Feeling somewhat embarrassed, Stella covered it up. It was probably very easy to tell that they were flirting. In the doom room or the in the forest, they had tried to hide it from casual sight, but….

"Stella-san has her position. Announcing that kind of thing always causes an uproar. It's understandable that you two would think about not bringing such a disturbance during the busy Sword-Art Festival season, and even I would think about the best thing to do. Therefore it's not like we're thinking about blaming you for it. The

crucial thing is what you will do after this."

Saying that, Shizuku turned her sight to Kagami who was sitting next to Stella.

"Kusakabe-san. The discussion is moving toward things that people who know my family circumstances to a certain extent would understand, but…."

"Nya ha ha. Clear information is a journalist's life, you know? Well, just as far as the situation goes."

"In that case, I want us to speak our minds without holding anything back, but in this case, it could possibly lead to Onii-sama's expulsion, right?"

Kagami declared without hesitation toward Shizuku's question.

"It is unlikely to, presently."

"Oh my, is that so?"

"After all, Alice-chan. It's not like Senpai and Stella are both doing something bad, right? Even though we just talked about it now, mere news reporters are disregarding the feelings of Stella who is royalty, and rudely calling her relationship a 'scandal', you know. This story was from start to end a 『**The Princess of Vermillion found a lover while studying abroad. Eek! What kind of person is he~? Yay yay!**』 kind of thing. The company that wanted to forcibly make this a 'scandal' is just instigating a pointless disturbance. With that kind of composition, those people would lack legitimacy after all. At present, they have nothing but huge false accusations. And naturally, those people understanding that much would manipulate this kind of impression, and to do it they'd go trawling for faults by holding an inquiry. Senpai is no fool, so no matter how many times they try to simply find fault in him, they probably won't collect anything, and it's hard to imagine the League headquarters choosing expulsion. Because the League very much considers expulsion a last resort."

"Last resort? Hey, Kagami, what do you mean?"

"The League has never expelled anyone without inquiring about a student knight. To put it in a way Stella-chan can easily understand, look, what about Donrou Academy's Kurashiki-kun?"

"Yes."

"Even with people as notorious as he is, the League's response ends at reprimand."

"…It is extremely light, true."

"I wonder what reason there is for that?"

Kagami nodded, and answered Shizuku's question.

"The knights who receive expulsion, they are generally those who become criminals."

Mage-knights who acquired their license are, of course, Blazers who as student knights considered how to be successful in life using the strength of their superpowers. Those kinds of people, what happens to them if their privileges are permanently revoked? The answer was that they are very likely to become criminals who use their Blazer abilities for unlawful activities. It was a reality that statistics from numerous investigations had already made clear.

"Well, it's natural. Although this is absolutely human nature for those who make such a mess that they are expelled, it's safer to have a chained mad dog than an unchained one, right? That's why the League wanted to lay down the rule that all knights are to be supervised, you know. Receiving that intent from the League, almost every League member nation created laws to proceed that way with all the Blazers in their country. Although Japan has human rights organizations clamoring, and hasn't taken that plunge yet."

In doing that.

"By quickly expelling someone, the League would create criminals with its own hand, and in doing so leave those criminals unregulated. Therefore even the League deals with expulsion decisions very slowly. And in particular, expulsions of student

knights who are still in the position of learning and studying are extremely rare cases."

However—

"But this time, it seems that a rare case serious enough for expulsion has arisen. That's why I'm worried, you know. What kind of suffering Senpai is going through right now, and such."

The inquiry is to find fault in how he is responding in attitude and tone; that was the ultimate goal of the Ethics Committee. But if Ikki himself recognized that he had been thoughtless, that would become a truth that everyone accepted. That truth would become strong support for expulsion. Therefore, the Ethics Committee would without a doubt try to get that conclusion no matter the method.

Everyone there sank into silence at Kagami's meek words. The Ethics Committee hearing was going on in deep underground where sunlight didn't reach. That place was Itsuki Kurogane's territory. And the Ethics Committee was a position monopolized by generations after generations of the Kurogane house's bloodline. A sacred ground, so to speak. There was absolutely no one in the vicinity except for people close to the Kurogane house. There was no way that Ikki would receive decent treatment in that kind of place. Though he would probably not receive physical torture like in a true inquisition, they could use methods to run a person down as much as they liked.

The more Stella thought about it, the more her head filled with unpleasant guesses. In truth, she hadn't slept decently for two days. Whenever she closed her eyes, she would imagine what kind of days her beloved was spending deep underground. But that was….

"…Entirely my fault."

If she was just a normal girl. She wouldn't have been used by Ikki's enemies. That kind of unavoidable regret swirled and spread through her mind. She had become Ikki's noose. A restriction on his appearance at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, she was hold him back during this important time. That was painful, painful—

"Should I separate from Ikki…."

From Stella's mouth, a few words spilled out in such complaints.

"After all… isn't it my fault? If I were an ordinary girl, this kind of thing—"

"Stella-chan!"

In an instant, what penetrated Stella's ear was Arisuin's voice in a blade-sharp cry. Her spine shuddered at that voice, and Stella raised her gaze, taken aback.

And she became aware.

That the points of icicles as sharp as lances had approached before her eyes.

Stella had already reflexively donned her *Empress Dress*, and blocked the strike from icy spears by crossing both her arms. But that strike was fast and heavy, lifting Stella's body off her feet and knocking her body into the dining room wall, smashing through it, and blowing Stella's body completely out of the dining room itself.

「Eeeek!」

「Wh-What are you doing!?」

Panic filled the dining room at the unexpected situation. In the middle of the noise, Stella asserted her personal ability that had received the ice spears, and…

Crack

…frowned at the pain reverberating through her bones. It seemed that a bone in her arm had been fractured. Stella's flame would seize and vaporize even a rifle bullet, but the best it could do was melt and blunt that sharp spear-point. Only one person here could use water magic to that degree.

"Wh-What are you doing, Shizuku!?"

Stella protected her injured arm, and at the same time roared at Shizuku who was standing imposingly on the table with *Yoishigure* in one hand. And Shizuku….

"And I ask the same of you. What are you saying?"

Shizuku's eyes flew through Stella's mind, and sent Stella's spine

trembling so much it couldn't compare to what it was like not long ago.

Shizuku's tone was quite calm, and that expression was as composed as always. But Shizuku's eyes had a chilly brilliance that Stella had never seen before, and her whole body seemed to be frozen in wrath.

"You, do you not understand the reason Onii-sama has gone along with this farce? For Onii-sama, the option of sticking to silence and not responding to the hearing exists. At any rate, the inquiry is nothing more than an inquisition in name. It is a farce coming to fruition. Those people will not listen to anything Onii-sama says. Knowing this and facing their request, it is because he can't stomach people exploiting the opportunity to cast vulgar intentions on your relationship with him. It is because he thinks the relationship between you two are just that important. If you betray Onii-sama without understanding that—I won't forgive you for it."

That icy fury, it made Stella very conscious of her own slip of the tongue.

"…I'm sorry. I was being stupid just now."

Stella obediently bowed her head to Shizuku.

How could I say such a miserable thing?

To this day, she had never considered her relationship with Ikki to be a mistake. The fact that Ikki was in the middle of the enemy camp, it was proof that even now he was still still proud of their relationship. The enemy's intention was to sow doubt on Ikki's responsibility, and an adult who is called a knight would be able to stand his ground. Therefore, if negative testimony like "it was reckless" and "it was a mistake" was taken, it would be impossible to make an official announcement of their friendship. Because if words like "I am a meager fool who can't take responsibility" were confessed by Ikki himself, those words would become proof.

「Stella, I love you, and I want to say so proudly in front of everyone.」

Ikki was putting into practice the words he said that day as he always did. His love for her was just that strong. In that case, what should she do? To his strong feelings, how should she answer them?

I can't do anything, not a single thing–

That was—

"Sheesh, you two are destroying the school building without a care, aren't you?"

Suddenly, a voice mixed with a sigh came to Stella and Shizuku. The owner of the somewhat husky voice was Kurono Shinguuji, who had weaved her way toward the two of them through the murmuring students.

"I'd like it if someone could also fix the body over here too."

While grumbling under her breath, Kurono came outside through the hole that Shizuku had opened, and she gently snapped her fingers.

Thereupon, the scattered debris of wall material floated up, and installed themselves into the hole that Stella had broken through. It was as if someone had played a video in reverse. In a few seconds, the large hole had been filled in entirely.

"That should do it."

Nodding her head approvingly at her own work, Kurono turned her gaze from the filled wall to where Stella had fallen. And—

"Vermillion. I have a bit to say about the Kurogane matter. Will you come to the chairman's office?"

She told Stella to come the place where she herself worked.

Part 3

Kurono invited Stella into the chairman's office that reeked of tobacco and had Stella sit on the sofa for visitors. She herself sat down herself on the sofa across the table between them.

"It's become an extremely troublesome thing, hasn't it?"

She grumbled with a brow etched with wrinkles. The fatigue that could be seen was probably from repercussions arising from having been investigated for being responsible for Ikki and Stella staying in the same room. Well, as far as the system of boys and girls sharing a room went, Stella still had some problems with it even now, so she wasn't very sympathetic, but….

That's right….

Because of the great pains it caused, she would listen to the important matter displayed before them that was on their mind, and Stella preemptively threw out a question.

"…Madam Chairman, what's happening with Ikki's selection battles? They're not being counted as default loss by absence, right?"

"I'm not staking my prestige on that kind of thing. Kurogane is having bouts conducted with opponents during that sham battle with the League's Japanese branch. Of course even one of the school's teachers is accompany him as a referee. Because we know not to leave the judgment to those people."

"Can we go to support him, I wonder?"

"No, that's impossible. Until the inquiry is over, all face-to-face meetings are prohibited."

"He's being completely isolated, then…."

However, Kurono's firm promise that Ikki won't lose by default for absence was reassuring. As expected, having him lose because of his current confinement was too much. One worry was diminished, and Stella took a breath of relief, then pressed Kurono for the next matter.

"Then what did you need me for?"

Regarding that, Kurono replied with a short "Oh", and got to the point.

"About what's happening right now, I want to hear what your parents back in Vermillion think."

Why was Kurono concerned about something like that? That kind of problem existed, but it wasn't like they were hiding it, and after Ikki was spirited away, Stella had contacted her parents by phone and told them the situation honestly.

"Mother understood my judgment. But… Father was completely against it. He was very angry, and shouted 'He laid a hand on our daughter without getting my permission, Kiyo!"

"He loves you, no?"

"He has no ability to let go of his children. Because he was so threatening, it looks like he'll be coming to Japan soon."

"And how long will that be?"

"Three weeks from now, I suppose."

"Right when the selection battles end, huh? …Exactly as we get near our goal."

"Goal?"

Stella tilted her head in confusion at Kurono's coughed words. What did she mean by goal?

Kurono explained her grumbled words to Stella.

"If the King of Vermillion himself visited, as expected it wouldn't be just an inquiry or confinement without visitors. Even those red-suited people would have no choice but to table Kurogane's matter. And with that, if you and your fellows were to hold a discussion, you would definitely reach a conclusion about all of this. The drift of the argument made by those people who developed Kurogane as scandal right now, that wouldn't be part of such a discussion, because they only want to arbitrarily direct it as they please with no more than speculation. If the King of Vermillion himself approved of Kurogane, those people will have the basis of their argument overturned. If that happened, it would be their turn to be investigated."

"A counterattack?"

"Exactly. For entangling my own student on my own territory in their design, I'll have them regret it until they die."

At Kurono's words and her expression, Stella body had goosebumps.

"Scary…."

Just by being close, she felt pressed by Kurono's mood. This intensity that made students weakly fall back, it was expected of the knight who was formerly the world's third strongest.

But that's certainly the goal, yes.

The claim of the red-suited Ethics Committee, it was that Ikki so thoughtless that it could create an international problem. In that case, if her father the sovereign of Vermillion were to approve of Ikki, it would settle everything.

The problem was… would that father obediently approve of his daughter's lover?

"…Ooh. I'm not confident, somehow. Because he probably already decided and won't listen to me."

For example, during a school event once in middle school, she went camping in the mountains, and he dressed up in a bear skin and watched over her from the forest the entire time. He was that kind

of father. At the time, she thought he was a real bear and was going to kill him. Well… when she found out it was really her father, she still wanted to kill him. He was that kind of parent, so she couldn't see him welcoming Ikki. Stella was at her wits end, and Kurono spoke while giving her a gentle smile with an unusual sense of motherliness.

"It'll be fine. He's someone who brought up a daughter as honest as you, so there's no way he wouldn't understand Kurogane's caliber."

It was a reason that one couldn't say was based on anything. But Kurono's words removed Stella's anxiety with alarming ease.

Right, he wasn't a bad father. Stella also loved her father from the bottom of her heart. That was why Stella thought so. That he would want to like the boy who loved her.

"It would be… nice if that happened."

"Well, you'll also assist him when they meet. It's advice from a married person, but greeting a girl's parents is a group effort to go forward with before cutting the cake. Don't just leave it to the man. It's suitable for him to see how his own daughter might protect the man."

"I-I'll make the best of it."

"Ha ha, ah, do your best. …But anyway. I think it's best to be honest, but your relief is making you more energetic than I expected.

"A good little sister happened to revitalize me a little while ago."

Touching the crack put into in her right arm, Stella smiled a bit, and made a decision in her heart. That's right, leaving it all to the man was something that a good woman doesn't do. She would fight too.

「Stella, I love you, and I want to say so proudly in front of everyone.」

Right now, Ikki was putting into practice the words he had

exchanged with her. In that case—

Me too, I will protect my promise.

Part 4

The tenth underground level of the Japanese League branch. Ikki Kurogane was being detained there.

"I've left food on the table. There is another hearing tomorrow morning at six, so hurry up and sleep."

Saying that discourteously, a red-suited person with a bad complexion engaged the electronic lock on the room and left.

The room had only a stained bed and a table and chair that looked as if they would break any moment, and nothing else. However, Ikki who had been standing on his feet the entire day for the hearing was still grateful for it.

He heaved a sigh that had all of his fatigue in it, and sat down on that shabby chair. The inquiries went from six in the morning to eleven at night. The Ethics Committee had chairs, and with their four rotations each day, they didn't become tired, but to stand on one's feet from morning to night, it really did make one weary as expected. If it continued for a week, even Ikki who trained on a regular basis would become sluggish without knowing it.

But it probably wasn't just because of the fatigue that he was accumulating.

"I really miss having decent rice, I guess."

In front of Ikki's eyes as he grumbled in disgust, his evening meal was left there. There were two bars of crude portable food. When he looked at the calorie information on the back, there was certainly true that those two bars supplied enough calories and nutrition for one meal, but it couldn't be enough to satisfy the appetite of Ikki who was both a knight and a growing teen. Because these were the meals every day down here, Ikki was tormented by

chronic hunger.

And moreover—

"As usual, there's nothing to drink either."

Even consumption of water was restricted. It seemed that for some reason, the drinking water that was part of the rationed meals was missing. And the room that Ikki was imprisoned in was suffering a water outage since some weeks ago, so even the toilets did not have running water.

It was quite simple harassment. Naturally, since he was not given water during the inquiry, he used the toilet during the times he was allowed to take a shower and when he went between the inquiry chamber and his room, and during those times he took as much water as he could.

By getting through the days that way, he wouldn't fall apart from fatigue. He was alone among enemies. Surrounded on all sides, fighting alone.

But it's fine.

He was used to that kind of thing. He had always acted alone. Depending on no one, being taught by no one. It was certainly not the first time he had fought like this. Closing his eyes, he could remember it even now. The scenes of of his youth, him hiding in the mountain behind his parents' home, swinging his sword silently. As far as Ikki was concerned, most of his life felt like that. Therefore, it wasn't a big deal to withstand this at this point. Whether isolation or animosity, he was quite used to them. Therefore whatever method Akaza and the others used to get from Ikki the testimony that "he admitted it was a mistake", stuff like this wouldn't break Ikki's tenacious determination.

If it's like this, I can tolerate it.

If they did it like this, no matter who it was, he'll be going to meet the king of Vermillion soon enough, probably. It was a serious affair with his important daughter. There was no way Stella's father

would let the man in question go free. In that case, what he should do was stubbornly stick to his principles against petty third-parties until that day. If he did so, eventually Akaza and the others would lose their right to intervene in the media uproar.

Rather, it's there that my real crisis begins, I guess.

He would get the approval of Stella's father. That was the momentous event that Ikki had never gotten before in his life. Just thinking about it made his heart pound furiously from nervousness. But he couldn't run away from it. Not that. From the moment he fell in love with the girl called Stella Vermillion, it was an inevitable conclusion. That was why from that moment, Ikki had always been thinking about how to greet the king and make a good impression.

For the greeting, he should probably wear a suit, right? His hair… part it on one side? He imagined it a little.

…Whoa, that's terrible.

A strained laugh spilled out at the thought of him looking like a salaryman.

But more than just by how he looked, how would he convey his important sincerity? In the end, it was this that couldn't be done with trickery. Or rather, trickery would backfire instead. There was nothing but to uprightly facing each other with complete sincerity, and appeal with as much earnestness as possible.

Since time is precious, should I practice a little bit?

Trickery was useless, but the idea of performing without practice was making him nervous after all. He needed to rehearse.

Thinking that, Ikki closed his eyes and focused his thoughts. What appeared on the inside of his eyelids was the face Stella's father, the king of Vermillion. Because Stella had showed him a picture once, he could remember it. The same blazing hair as Stella. A lion-like majesty that could be felt from a gigantic stature close to two meters tall, with sideburns linked to a beard.

When he recalled that vision and opened his eyelids—before his

eyes, there was no doubt that man was standing there.

Of course, the real thing wasn't there. It was only a virtual image brought forth by Ikki's concentration that had been honed to the utmost. Picturing the image of the supposed other party, and then practicing a paired kata. It was a basic technique for a practitioner of martial arts. This was a practical application. However, if it was an expert like Ikki, the image would have a gaze, heartbeat, and temperature unlike a normal image. It would have an overwhelming realism even to the point of an audible pulse. With that realism, it would even shake the spirit of Ikki who had created it.

The king of Vermillion who had the severe features of a lion didn't speak and didn't move, only staring at Ikki with the same crimson irises of his honest daughter. At that gaze, Ikki felt pressure that seemed to burn the outer surface of his skin. Sweat poured from his whole body, and his throat went dry in exchange.

But if he couldn't handle a virtual image, he couldn't stand in front of the real thing. Ikki took a deep breath, and directly returned the king of Vermillion's gaze. Then and there, he got down on both knees, lowered his head as if pressing it onto the bed, and—

"Please give me your daughter!"

—expelled all of the breath in his lungs in his cry. And at that moment—

"I won't give you my daughter."

A voice shook Ikki's ears with a rejection that was as heavy as lead. Hadn't Ikki been serious enough?

…No, no no no no. Wait. Wait just a second.

No matter what it was, no matter how much pressure the real thing would have, an image was just an image after all. There was no way it could reply.

Then what was that voice? Ikki raised his head, and—

"I would never give Shizuku to you."

—his real father, Itsuki Kurogane, was staring down on Ikki with cold gray eyes.

"F-F-F-F-Father!?"

Part 5

After that, Ikki brought over the one chair that was in the room confining him. Itsuki sat in that chair, facing Ikki across the table. They faced each other for five minutes. Up to then, the two people did not ask questions or converse.

Th-This is awkward….

Ikki felt a strange sweat appearing on his back.

Well, it was understandable. They had just met with that kind of impression, but moreover, Ikki hadn't met his father Itsuki face to face since he was five years old. Honestly, after meeting him all of a sudden, he had no idea what to talk about. He didn't know what kind of face he should show.

Or for that matter, what does this person want with me to come here after such a long time in the first place?

And as Ikki tried to read Itsuki's thoughts….

"Ikki."

Itsuki broke the silence and spoke the first words.

"Y-Yes."

Ikki responded in a voice with a little bit of excitement in it. The sweat on his back increased. His chest began a strange throbbing. Just… what was this person going to say with his next words?

Because he's the kind of man who goes too far, there's a bit of anticipation—

"You, do you love Shizuku as a woman?"

"Bu!"

"Incest is forbidden. It's immoral, but more than anything else, you've been together since she was born so you shouldn't see her as—"

"W-Wait, wait! That was me doing a simulation of my greetings to Stella's parents! Shizuku is very important to me, but I'll never look at my little sister as someone of the opposite sex!"

"Is that so? Good."

This was bad. Ikki could've just been thought of as a very dangerous person. Itsuki looked like he was about to give a very serious lecture.

No, if he was really in such a situation, that response probably would be reasonable…."

—However, thanks to Ikki yelling out so impatiently, some of the stiffness in the room had been removed. Ikki boldly asked something of his father.

"U-Umm, Father. Why are you here?"

"My son was in a place one elevator trip away. I came to see his face at a whim, I suppose."

"…Is that right?"

Ikki didn't know whether those words were Itsuki's real thoughts. At any rate, Itsuki always had a sour expression, and those gray eyes were as impossible to read as ever. However, even if he couldn't understand Itsuki's real thoughts….

What… is this?"

Ikki felt his heart throbbing. And a tingle was spreading across both his cheeks.

I… could it be that I'm happy?

At this meeting with his father after ten years, Ikki was hesitant to analyze his own reaction. Itsuki, in contrast, wasn't even having much strain, and some words came out.

"It seems that you've had very good progress, haven't you?"

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"The record for the selection battles that were introduced at Hagun this year. I heard you've had sixteen consecutive victories so far."

"Oh, yes…. If you included the result of the match from yesterday, it would be seventeen wins, I think."

"It seems you weren't fighting only weak opponents either. …It was considerable."

"…Yes."

What was that just now? Did he just receive… praise?

What should I do? …I'm really happy.

In that moment, Ikki became more and more sure. He was happy.

He was able to meet his father face to face. He was able to hear his father's voice. Indeed, Ikki Kurogane loved Itsuki Kurogane even now. That was why he answered that he wanted to stay connected to Itsuki, when Stella asked him in that small mountain shack.

As far as he was concerned, Itsuki was his one and only father. However badly he was treated, even if he wasn't accepted, a child couldn't hate his parent. Parents could loathe children, but children could only adore parents. Ikki was not an exception. Ikki knew that this inquiry, being shut up here, all of it was with his father's participation. But even so, even so.

His father was looking at him. His father was speaking to him. Ikki couldn't help but be happy about that.

For that reason, he thought….

If by any chance….

If it was right now, now that he was different from how he was in the past, maybe—couldn't he get this person acceptance?

「You can't do anything, so don't try.」

Wouldn't he receive a response different from the last words they exchanged? Thinking that, Ikki began to speak.

"U-Umm, Father."

"What is it?"

"…Th… I-I'm fighting on… now. My rank is still F, but still, I've won against strong people, and I don't intend to lose after this either. I'm already different from when I couldn't do anything. I'm fighting and training… so that I won't become the Kurogane family shame, and I think I'll become splendidly strong. S-So, so…."

His voice was shaking with nervousness, and he drew a tiny struggling breath.

"If I can become the champion at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, will you… accept me then?"

Ikki mustered as much of his courage as he could and begged that of his father Itsuki.

In contrast, Itsuki stared back at Ikki wordlessly for a short while—

"…I see."

—and quietly closed his eyes.

"I never understood why you became distant. But now I understand. You thought that I did not accept you because you were weak."

"Yes…."

Ikki nodded. It wasn't like that was the entire reason he left the house, but it was no mistake that he thought so. But if that was the case, now that he had become strong—

"If that is the case, then you've made a big mistake. I have always accepted you as my son."

"Wh…."

At the unexpected words, Ikki's eyes grew wide and hard. What had his father said just now?

—Always… accepted him?

"Th-That's a lie!"

"It's no lie. Otherwise, would I have come to see your face?"

"B-But… haven't you never done anything with me? Management of my Blazer abilities, or training in martial arts that even the branch family children were given, anything at all!"

Indeed. Ikki remembered the oppressiveness of that family even now. Itsuki had locked Ikki out of everything, and the people who saw Ikki being locked out persecuted him as someone the head of the family despised. That pain, bitterness, isolation—even now his heart tightened at the memories.

That was why Ikki had to ask.

"If you accepted me, why didn't you look after me like everyone else!?"

To that question, Itsuki's expression didn't shift even a little bit.

"There was no need to instruct you, so I didn't. That was all. Because even if I taught an incomplete technique to someone who did not have ability, however much I teach and teach, it would be futile."

Giving an answer that was extremely on-the-nose, he continued with a few words of "no".

"If it ended at being futile, that would be fine. The worst case was if it turned out like how you are now, creating an incomplete outcome due to incomplete strength."

"Wh-What do you mean!?"

Ikki asked the question, not being able to understand the words just now.

In response, Itsuki opened his eyes again, and spoke his true meaning with that voice as heavy as lead.

"…The Kurogane house is a family of mage-knights from a lineage of Blazers stretching back to the era when they were called samurais. We have a responsibility to bring knights of the entire country together. However, creating the unity needed for knights to be one organization is difficult. It is because knights are superhumans, each with paranormal powers. Because every one of them holds too much excess power, they cannot exist as normal humans. For such people to be organized, there must be a system of rank. We established the visible form of that hierarchy, and classified every separate ability into an appropriate rating. In doing so, we made everyone aware of his individual role, with organization we maintained harmony. This was necessary. A mechanism has its big and small cogs, but by being aware of every pertinent part and knowing each individual's appropriate behavior, for the first time there was accurate function. Whether above or below, everyone was in his appropriate place. A person above could look down upon a person below and think, 'I surpass her", and in his conceit would not forget his own duties. …That is why, Ikki, the existence of someone like you harms the organization. When

someone like you who cannot do anything says 'I'll do something', the people below embrace unproductive conceits. That they must be able to do something. Becoming arrogant, they try to do things and forget their own place. And it brings about unproductive waste to the majority of cogs in the mechanism. If you want to know why rank is absolutely fixed and not corrected every now and then, it's to make overturning it an extremely rare thing. That kind of unproductive effort must be protected against. That was why I told you this. *You can't do anything, so don't try.*"

Itsuki spoke those words with disinterest. The principles behind the conduct of people like Itsuki existing in them. Today, they made Ikki understand people like Itsuki Kurogane for the first time.

The family called Kurogane had fulfilled its inherited duty for generations. For the sake of that duty, it charged itself with an iron law, an order to its life. That was… his father, the mage-knight who carried the nickname *Iron Blood*.

But….

"Wait… wait…."

But that….

"Then Father, didn't you tell me not to do anything because I became the shame of the family?"

"Obviously. As far as the family is concerned, you're inconsequential. The duty of the Kurogane house is to protect the harmony between the knights of this country. And for the sake of that, people who can't do anything have a duty to not do anything. …Ikki, I've said I accept you as you wanted. So—stop pursuing knighthood at once."

Ikki shook.

"You can't do anything, so don't try. In the past or in the present, I have only desired one thing from you."

Ikki was convinced that those few words carried his father's true feelings.

But it was a truth that he could not possibly accept. Why?

Then … what am I to this person…?

His father did not truly hate him. But rather than that… he'd prefer being hated over not showing the ability he wanted. Because not being hated… it was just a small desire.

However, the truth was not like that. Itsuki had no hopes, no expectations for Ikki.

That kind of thing… it wasn't too much, right…?

Hating him, not hating him, it wasn't about that. It was no different from being a stone on the side of the road. Favor or malice. Ikki felt like an idiot who couldn't get either one.

Ikki was that kind of existence for Itsuki. Realizing that, believing that, an icy grief flowed out from within Ikki.

"Hmm? What's with you? What are you crying about?"

Tears fell, **drip drop**, from Ikki's eyes.

Seeing them, Itsuki frowned as if baffled.

To Itsuki's response, Ikki… realized. Somewhere in Ikki's heart, he wanted a relationship with the one person who was his father. He wished that someday, the moment they would reach mutual understanding would come. But….

…Oh, I see.

Itsuki didn't understand the meaning of these tears, even to that extent….

This person and I are definitely cutting ties….

In that moment—with a **snip**…. Something in Ikki's heart….

Something precious made a sound, then fell silent. And starting from there… the thing called Ikki Kurogane began to fall apart.

Part 6

After that, Ikki who had abruptly burst into tears, did not respond to any inquiry except with sobs. Because of that, Itsuki left the room saying that there was no helping it.

And as it was, he returned to his top floor office by elevator. There, a red-suited man with a barrel-like physique was waiting.

"Hello, hello, good afternoon Clan Head. Ah, I guess it became good evening a long time ago?"

"Akaza, is it?"

"So how did it go, I wonder? The situation with that boy?"

"The boy is as difficult to understand as ever. Though not as much as his brother Ouma, I suppose."

"Without speaking on personality, hasn't his physical condition been broken?"

"What do you mean?"

"He he he. Well, his food has been just sliiightly adjusted, and some drugs to ruin the health of his body and heart simultaneously has been added."

…Truth serum, inherited from the military police era? You've made your move extremely directly, haven't you?"

"Like how he knows us well, we also know his stubbornness veeery well. We didn't think from the start that something along the lines of this inquiry would break him. The inquiry was purely an excuse to isolate him. The present state of affairs has changed from what we hypothesized entirely. After this, he will meet with the king of

Vermillion—"

"You don't have to explain it. I can imagine the main point."

Saying so, Itsuki silenced Akaza who was beginning his presentation.

"I am entrusting this matter to you. I don't care what methods you use. Do as you like."

However—

"I won't forgive failure. Banish Ikki without fail."

"Yes, I understand. He he he. Well, please watch it as it comes along."

Speaking thus, Akaza withdrew.

Becoming alone in the room, not thinking anything, Itsuki casually shifted his gaze to the portraits of successive directors hanging on the wall of his office. More than half of them were people who had the surname Kurogane. Just counting the number of portraits showed how many generations they had inherited the responsibility. Here right now, Itsuki was also one such person. For that reason, he was carrying out the responsibility without exception. Picturing the best for the majority himself….

The way of life within my means that doesn't expand my own territory. It is the way of life that brings happiness to the majority of mankind.

Because people like Ikki, powerless people who were pushed aside, were few. Useless aspirations or self-confidence received as gifts, they only brought loss to both the person himself and to the organization. In that case, such things weren't needed. Naturally, the managing organization would make sure they didn't exist.

Therefore, I will use any method to eliminate them.

For example, even if it was his own son, he would show no mercy.

That is my duty.

Everything was for the sake of the iron law. In the past or in the present, that was "Iron Blood" Itsuki Kurogane's sense of righteousness.

Part 7

It was the tenth day after Ikki had been taken away by the Ethics Committee. Due to the League's Japanese branch, Ikki's eighteenth selection battle had passed. The opponent had been a nameless E-Rank.

Following that was the homeroom teacher, Yuuri Oreki. Before the match, Shizuku, who had heard about it from Kagami, brought Arisuin to wait for Oreki in front of the main gate. At the time that the sun was beginning to slide under the horizon, Oreki came back alone. Shizuku and Arisuin immediately rushed over to her, and asked about the outcome of that day's match.

"Oreki-sensei, Onii-sama… how was he? Did he win?"

To that question,

"Eh? Ah… yes. He got his eighteenth victory safely."

Oreki replied with a somehow vague tone. Of course, Arisuin immediately pressed the questioning.

"Is there something worrying you, I wonder?"

For a brief while, Oreki brooded without speaking, but she was also conversing with Ikki's blood relative Shizuku, so she answered without hiding anything.

"…The truth is, Kurogane-kun's physical condition seemed to be bad."

"Onii-sama… was?"

"Yes. His complexion was bad, and he was constantly coughing in pain…."

Though Oreki also added that, nonetheless, it was amazing that he had taken the win smoothly.

Shizuku and Arisuin exchanged glances.

"I wonder if he got Stella-chan's cold."

"How could that be true?"

Even if it wasn't true, they had heard Ikki had become soaked while in Okutama. And if the inquiry had deepened his fatigue, it wouldn't be strange if his physical condition had been disturbed. Shizuku and Arisuin thought so. However—

"…No, it was probably…."

Oreki who was well-acquainted with illness had noticed it. Ikki's condition was probably not an ordinary poor physical health. However—

"Sensei?"

"No. It's nothing. Well, Sensei is going to Madam Chairman right now."

Oreki withdrew her words and departed. It wasn't something she'd speak to students like them about. In her judgment, making guesses would only agitate Shizuku's anxiety.

However, the two discerning people noticed it.

"…Oreki-sensei was about to say something."

"Sensei is very well-informed about disease, right? Perhaps she sensed something about Ikki's symptoms."

"Something like… it wasn't an ordinary cold, maybe?"

"Probably, I think. It may be that something was done to Ikki."

At those words, Shizuku felt a chill running down her spine. She knew that if it was those people, if it was her father, they were

capable of anything.

"Onii-sama… please be safe…."

Everything was happening deep underground, out of her reach. She couldn't do anything about it.

Shizuku, who could do nothing but pray, was awfully vexed.

Part 8

"Hey! What are you blanking out for!?"

Along with an angry voice and a face red from alcohol, the drinking water for use by inquiry members was thrown on his face, and Ikki opened his eyes.

"Sleeping during the inquiry, it shows lack of sincerity!"

It was a middle-aged man wearing thin round glasses in front of bangs, shouting close to Ikki's ears. His yelling voice was awfully loud, and it resounded in the small chamber. However, even that kind of voice was distant to Ikki now.

That's right. Am I still sleeping?

The inquiry had started two weeks ago. The fatigue of Ikki who had come here was reaching its peak. The confinement had extended over a long period of time. The questions and answers had repeated many tens of times. The assertions hadn't been accepted once. The spirit of any human would have been scraped off thoroughly.

In addition, a few days ago, Ikki had abruptly become feverish and started coughing painfully. His lungs weren't functioning normally. However much he inhaled the air, pain rushed through him, and he couldn't breathe properly. With chronic lack of oxygen, his consciousness had become hazy. It was at least pneumonia. It might be liable to worsen further. It was a symptom that logically would necessitate him being sent to a hospital immediately, but the Ethics Committee would not allow such a thing.

"Hmph. When things become inconvenient, you feign sickness? Something a brat would do."

Driving Ikki whose consciousness was already hazy into a corner.

Not letting him rest even a hundredth of a second.

"Now, let's continue the discussion. Concerning the secret arrangement you reached with the board chairman Kurono Shinguuji. We believe that there is an ethical problem in that this secret agreement ignored the fact you were deemed insufficient in aptitude under the system of the previous board chairman such that you were to repeat a year—"

This dialogue had also happened many, many times. The standard created by previous board chairman's system that judged him to repeat the year, and forbade Ikki from participating in classwork, was unreasonable. That sort of thing… the Ethics Committee surely understood this without him saying it. They were the ones who originally induced the previous board chairman to make that standard in the first place.

But Akaza and the others did not heed it. They threw away the issue. They hammered on questions. But they didn't listen to the answers. Without listening to responses, they dwelt at great length on bad impressions and defiance. More than that feeling of wasted effort, Ikki had put up with a considerable lot by now. But despite that, he had given many refutations, and….

"…Ack, **cough cough**"

He crumpled while coughing violently.

"You bastard! Who gave you permission to sit!? Do you have no willpower, you weakling!?"

"Guh…!"

Curling up and ignoring it with all his strength, Ikki smashed his nose on the floor. With a **bam**, a metallic smell spread through his nose, and droplets of red fluid stained the floor.

…How miserable.

Thinking about his current state, Ikki could only laugh bitterly. Even he could slightly tell that his physical condition was unnatural. That perhaps his poor health was due to drugs. However,

if Ikki was the way he was usually, even if his physical condition a little bad, he would probably not collapse all the way to this point.

As expected, the decisive blow was his meeting with his father, Itsuki Kurogane. Alas, Ikki believed that no matter how far apart his father was, how cold his father was, in some respect, just slightly, he and his father was connected. Somewhere in his heart, he always believed that. Alas, he believed that. It was something which betrayed him more than anything, and that truth had shattered the stability of his soul.

With his soul that had lost its balance, his body that was attacked by disease could not support him. And once it had collapsed once, the rest was bottomless. Ikki's heart and body had crumbled like he was rolling down a hill. Ikki was now just a shadow of himself.

"My my, please pardon him since he has gone to that extent."

Suddenly, Akaza left his seat, and waved back the men who were ignoring Ikki's face. Then he showed a smile of ill taste in his thin eyes, and came close beside Ikki.

"He he he. It must be extremely painful, no?"

Ikki was silent.

"Well, even if the inquiry is dragged this long, it isn't unreasonable. But I want to understand. We are pushing to verify a knight as splendid as yourself, you know? ...Buuut, after all this time, we haven't made any progress. So I've been thinking. Of a brilliant way to bring over my colleagues who haven't been convinced about the questions on your aptitude. Do you want me to tell you about iiit? You want me to tell you, riiight?"

At any rate, it could not be a decent thing. Because he knew that, he had no interest, but he had a feeling that if he didn't ask, the conversation wouldn't progress.

"…What… is it…*cough cough*!"

Ikki asked while coughing, and Akaza nodded and continued speaking in satisfaction.

"He he he. It's not as if it's anything special. Ikki-kun, you probably know already. To clear the path of one's destiny with his own sword is a knight's customary practice. In that case, why not act in accordance with the ancient tradition?"

"…Tradition?"

"In other words, entrust the matter of the disagreement between you and the people who have doubts about your aptitude to the final selection battle match tomorrow."

Leave the matter to the outcome of battle. With those words, Ikki understood what Akaza was saying.

"A wholehearted duel, against a designated fighter… is it?"

"Exactly. A decision reached by duel is absolute for us knights. It is an unwritten rule that can never be changed. No matter how far outside reason, how nonsensical or impossible, it is the custom of knights to abide by decisions made through dueling. That is equally true for the League. If you make a promise on this duel, and show everyone your strength with victory, then no one would be able to slip a word of doubt in to the matter of your qualities as a knight. For you, it would be an opportunity to turn everything around and recover from a hopeless situation. There's no other solution, don't you think? Am I wrong?"

"In other words, if I win tomorrow… you'll let me go with that, right?"

"Yes, yes. Of course we will. …It's just, the opponents you've had in your current condition were E-Rank third year students. …Frankly, by facing such low-level knights, it would be difficult to verify your strength. In that case, not everyone would come to consensus. At this duel, there is a need to prepare a suitable partner."

Well, Ikki thought so too.

"**Cough**… Who, then? …This partner…?"

At the question, Akaza gave a deep smile greater than any before it—

"We, the Ethics Committee, intend to nominate—the student council president, 'Raikiri' Touka Toudou."

—and gave the name of the assassin.

It was an opponent that Ikki at his very best could have no hope of surpassing. The first place in Hagun Academy's internal ranking, who reached the best four of last year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

To Ikki, who was on his hands and knees at the bottom of the earth, it was an excessively burdensome opponent. This kind of thing, there was no need to accept it. Eventually, he would meet with Stella's father. If he held out until then, he would arrive at the end of all of this. At a place that Akaza and the others could not reach. And in the first place, this talk about fighting was rude to Touka who had impressed him. Ikki had no reason to accept it.

However—

"Ahh, incidental to this topic, the king of Vermillion is already coming directly here. Which is to say… it would only take a little blunder, and the king would find out about your decision on the duel. Nooo, I'd feel completely regretful. Moreover, the king was extremely enthusiastic about seeing it. He wouldn't give his daughter to a man who could not surmount even an ordeal of that level! And, well, it sounded something like that, yes. If you refused here~, hmm, it would give a very poor impression, wouldn't iiit?"

Akaza had obstructed Ikki's escape perfectly.

…I see. From the beginning, this was the development that they intended to get, wasn't it?

And Ikki realized it accordingly. The inquiry was, from the start, just a pretext to separate Ikki from Hagun. Akaza and the others weren't thinking about bullying Ikki mentally in order to have him give up. It was all to have him make this promise, and to force him into this desperate duel. It was a scheme for this.

"Of course, you'll accept this like a man, won't yooou?"

If he had this duel, it would already become nonsense without reason or righteousness or anything else. The outcome of the battle was everything. It was the custom of knights since ancient times. Though there was no fault in Ikki, if he lost, he would become the bad one. In becoming the bad one, he would lose everything.

—It was a cruel offer. The risks were high, and the gains were nil.

If there were any gains at all, it would be Ikki regaining the freedom that by all rights he was already due. Truly, a cruel offer. But—

"…I under...stand. I'll do it."

Ikki answered so with a face full of bitterness. With all of his escape routes severed, he could do nothing else.

"Ha, ha ha, hahahahaha! Wonderful, wonderful! How wonderful! He he he! You are a boy after all! Everyone has heard him, right!? What he just said! At this moment, everything will be left to the duel tomorrow, to the outcome of that battle! Everything about the decision is in accordance with the ancient knight tradition, decided by the sword! And no one will make objections to that proud ruling! Well then—we'll declare the end of the inquiry here!"

In this way, the Worst One who was already under siege threw himself into a still more desperate struggle.

Ikki's opponent was Raikiri, who boasted an invincible sphere of influence over the close range that he was limited to. To face that opponent who he was uncertain of defeating even with perfect physical condition, he would be dragging his badly sickened body. Gambling all of his future—

But, standing before that fight, Ikki remembered the words Utakata had spoken some time before.

「Between the two of you, the weight of responsibility you're carrying is different.」

Indeed. Ikki could imagine the burden of many hopes and wishes that Touka had on those slender shoulders. That wasn't limited to just those of the children of the institution. Because she was burdened with the great admiration toward the best four of the entire country.

That kind of proud person… could he bring her down?

Could he do so with the sword of a worthless person whose own father would not even entrust with a single hope?

Chapter 4: One Slash

破軍学園壁新聞

キャラクタートピックス　　文責・日下部加々美

TOKA TODO

東堂刀華

■PROFILE

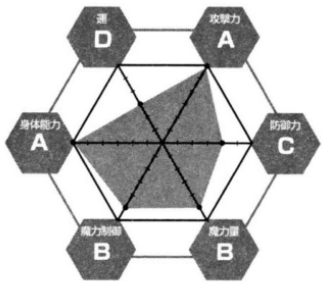
所属：破軍学園三年三組

伐刀者ランク：B

伐刀絶技：雷切（らいきり）

二つ名：雷切（らいきり）

人物概要：破軍学園生徒会長



ががみんチェック！

能力、人格、共に非の打ち所がない我らが生徒会長！
全体的に能力が高いのはですが日ランク騎士というところ。
時に彼女の代名詞にすらなっている伐刀絶技《雷切》の攻撃力は群を抜き、クロスレンジだと未だ無敗のまさに伝家の宝刀。
彼女に勝つには、いかにこの《雷切》を使わせないがポイントになってくるね！

Part 1

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm in good health. …Yes. The match tomorrow is the last one for the school, I guess. Eh? Assistance from Tokyo is coming? M-Make a banner!? It's too early to do that! And anyway, the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival is being held in Osaka this year. …Yeah, that's right. Anyway, whether win or lose, once the selection battles end I'll go make a temporary appearance. Yeah. See you later. Thanks for the vegetables. Say thanks to everyone for me too. And Mother, take care of your body, okay? …Bye bye."

Exchanging words of farewell, Touka switched off the phone function of her student datapad. The liquid crystal display had moisture clinging to it. It was evidence that the telephone conversation had gone out for fifty minutes. It seemed to have been a very long telephone conversation.

"The director was in good health?"

While sitting on the sofa of the student council room and biting into a huge red tomato, Utakata asked about the person who she had been conversing with on the phone. About the circumstances with the director of Wakaba House, the orphanage that the two of them had received favor from.

"It felt like she was as completely full of energy as ever."

The director—the elderly woman who Touka had called "Mother"—had suffered a heart attack last year. At that time, Touka had spent a whole night weeping, and even Utakata who was usually whistling had a pale face, but having heard the voice on the telephone just now, it seemed that her condition was already settled, and her energy had come back. Too much, in fact.

In any case—

"They already made a banner, she said?"

That. Even though victory in the selection battles hadn't been decided, or decisions regarding representatives, it seemed the director and the children of the facility had already made a banner for her taking the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. As expected, even Touka was lost for words.

"Because everyone is hasty… they really are."

"That's the only thing everyone is hoping for, you know. To the kids of Wakaba House, it's their wish for their hero, Raikiri."

Saying so, Utakata handed to Touka a photo taken from inside the cardboard box filled with vegetables delivered from Wakaba House. On that photo was the smiling mud-covered faces of the children who harvested the vegetables, and at the bottom were encouragement written with letters that they had memorized with utmost effort.

Indeed, there was no doubt that for the children of Wakaba House, Touka was a hero. Orphaned like them, graduating from the same facility, fighting grandly at the forefront of the world. Fighting, and continuing to win. That figure was what the children of Wakaba House admired.

Someday Utakata also wanted to shine like that girl. With that dream, the courage to face that dream was continuously being given to him by Touka.

And again, Touka herself was aware that she was that existence to others. Therefore, she couldn't lose. To preserve that kind of expectation, she couldn't let her strength bend to pressure. To an extent, it was the strongest part of Touka Toudou, Raikiri.

This, I'll read it slowly later.

Holding the photo to her chest with sweetly for a moment, Touka put it into her bag. Then she turned her attention to the box full of vegetables. Tomatoes to eggplants to cucumbers—it was an

assortment of summer vegetables harvested from the facility's vegetable garden. Each and every one was scraggly, giving a warm feeling that couldn't be put into words.

"Wow, look Uta-kun. This eggplant, it's so fat and splendid. If we made eggplant curry or something, it might come out delicious, right?"

"Yep, it's so dark and fat ant and splendid, huh?"

"J-Jeez! Giving such an old-man response!"

"Ha ha ha. But since it'll go bad being left here, we have to take it to the school cafeteria tomorrow, won't we?"

Suddenly, the words Utakata uttered. At those words, Touka's face clouded over slightly. Because she thought of something unpleasant.

"…Tomorrow, huh?"

Some time ago, a message came for her. It had come from Kurono Shinguuji. Its contents—was a change to her opponent for tomorrow. And furthermore, because that opponent was the Worst One, the topic of an upheaval right now—and unavoidably giving the impression that he had committed a crime.

Touka had inquired about that, and Kurono had not concealed it either. The adversity that Ikki was under, which she heard from Kurono, it was undoubtedly beyond description. The malice that surrounded him, that cornered him into the worst condition, and in addition was sending herself as the assassin against him.

However, needless to say Touka was unwilling to be that.

"Touka will be the representative to take up that duel?"

Even Utakata understood the matter. Therefore he, to Touka whose expression had clouded over, asked with a worried tone of voice. In response, Touka lowered her eyes.

"I don't have the right to decide. Madam Director also said so, but for me it's the absolute final selection battle match."

Indeed, It was a duel for Ikki, but for Touka it was an absolute selection battle. It was only changing the opponent, and she could not risk anything for the sake of the outcome. And even though there had not been alterations this sudden, changing situations had happened many so far. Therefore even Touka could not protest strongly. However—

"But you feel that this shouldn't happen, right?"

"Yeah…."

Because of that, there was no way this unpleasant feeling of shock would go away. All the more for a girl as kind-hearted as Touka.

…Therefore, she had taken one measure.

knock knock

Right on time, a visitor knocked on the student council room door.

"Who would that be at this hour?"

"I called her. Please come in."

"Forgive my intrusion."

The person who opened the door and entered was a petite young girl who looked like a bisque doll. She was the one who had fought with Touka with all of her strength, Shizuku Kurogane, the Lorelei.

Part 2

"This is an unexpected guest, isn't it?"

"…I didn't think that I would be called here by the person who gave me a such a black mark on my record this late at night either."

"Ha ha. That's quite natural. Oh, that's right, do you want a tomato? It's very sweet and delicious, you know."

"…I've already brushed my teeth, so no thank you. Besides, I probably wasn't called here to eat tomatoes. —Student President. What is it you want from me?"

Shizuku urged Touka toward the main point.

…She was being childish. Shizuku herself thought so. But meeting and speaking with the person who destroyed her dream, her goal of heading in front of the entire country with her brother, was making her uncomfortable after all.

Touka had the same exact feeling. Therefore she got right to the point, and spoke her reason for calling Shizuku here.

"The truth is, Madam Director sent a message a while ago… and because you're not unrelated, Shizuku-san, I wanted to convey it—"

What Touka was saying was that the competition schedule for tomorrow had been suddenly revised. And that Ikki was wagering his entire future in that fight, and had to make a challenge. Little by little, as Shizuku listened to the spiteful reality, her expression became full of wrath. And soon after she was done hearing all of it,

"…Lowlife…!"

With green eyes shining furiously, she spat a curse at someone who

wasn't here. And after that, she asked Touka.

"…President, will you fight? Against Onii-sama, whose physical condition is disturbed?"

"The student council president is nothing more than an ordinary student. Even if I cry objections, I have no power to change who I'm matched against."

Even if it was Touka, who was reluctant to fight, she could not do enough. However—even though it couldn't be helped and was she was unable to convince Shizuku, Touka had still called Shizuku here.

"Therefore Shizuku-san, I have a request for you who is Kurogane-kun's family."

"For me…?

"Yes. …Shizuku-san, can you advise Kurogane-kun not to do this?"

"…Eh?"

"Kurogane-kun's physical condition seems to be considerably bad. At worst, pneumonia. …I heard that it might be even worse than that. Speaking plainly, he very much cannot fight with his body like that. …However, it has been only a few days of interaction, but I've seen the kind of knight that Ikki Kurogane is. Speaking from that impression, I think he would drag himself to the fight even with his entire body full of wounds. Not in desperation, but in order to fight me seriously. He will definitely hold prospects of victory and resolution."

And—

"And I too, I am a girl who won't let the opponent I'm facing escape. If he comes to the fight, I will face him as his opponent with all my soul. As a result, even if a disastrous accident occurs…."

In that instant, a shiver ran through Shizuku's whole body.

This person… is serious.

Behind the glasses, she could clearly see the glint in Touka's eyes, and Shizuku was convinced. Touka was not exaggerating. Indeed, she was even thinking of the possibility of killing Ikki. And seeing the worst possible future, she had called Shizuku here.

"I beg of you. Please stop Kurogane-kun. The only one who could do that is you who are his family, I think."

Shizuku didn't respond immediately.

What should she do? What would be the correct thing? Without knowing that….

"…One night, please give me one night to think about it…."

The best she could do was squeeze out those words.

Part 3

Since Shizuku left the room, Touka muttered a few words of her heart's unease.

"Even if Kurogane-kun abstains from fighting tomorrow, even if I fight and win—I… can I be proud of going out before the entire country after such a fight?"

Remembering the smiles on the photo that came with the vegetables, and the message of support. Would she be able to have a fight worthy of their honest hopes and admiration?

It was an inescapable anxiety.

"Touka."

Suddenly, the hand of that uneasy Touka was wrapped by a small warmth. It was Utakata's hand. He grasped Touka's hand, and looked up at her from his always shorter vantage.

"Certainly, various things have been made ridiculous by adults pushing circumstances for their own convenience, but even so, you're you. You should fight the battle that you yourself will be proud of. We love you because you're like that. …And Kouhai-kun probably hopes for that too."

Naturally, he told Touka a truth that carried his conviction. What other people were thinking didn't matter. If Touka did as she thought was right, that was enough.

To those words… Touka gradually smiled. She could do it.

"Yeah. Thanks, Uta-kun."

That's right. From the beginning, that was all I could do.

She should just do the best she could.

"Alright!"

Touka shouted, and clapped her hands together. The sharp pain, it drove away her hesitation and confusion—she wasn't wavering anymore.

Tomorrow, if he drags himself to battle in order to face me, I won't show any mercy.

Without mercy, she would accompany him in battle with all her strength as a knight. And she would win. She would win without fail!

I'll win—and I'll go to the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival proudly!

In this way, the night before the decisive battle grew late—and Hagun Academy greeted the morning of the final representative selection battles for the fated Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

Part 4

"Well well. Even though it's only the start of summer. It looks like this year will be hot too."

On the morning of the final day of selection battles. At the station closest to Hagun Academy, the station master wiped the sweat from his forehead while sweeping up.

The sky was clear. It was a heat that poured down with uninterrupted sunlight. In this kind of season, the snug navy blue uniform was a little bit enduring.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of an approaching electric train, and raised his face. The train that stopped at every station was arriving at this one. It slowed to a stop in front of the station, and its door opened. The station master had no choice but to retreat three steps before the descending visitor.

Well, there aren't anybody who'd come here at this time, but…."

At any rate, Hagun Academy was the reasonable place to go from this station. Setting aside the students who were departing to go have fun on holidays, on time-slots for weekdays, there were no people stopping by the station near Hagun Academy, which had a residential dorm system. That was what he expected, but—

Hmm?

From the train's open door, a man slowly exited. His back was bent limply. It was an old man.

How unusual. Someone came on a weekday.

What kind of person was this? From such curiosity, the station master turned his eyes toward the old man who had descended.

And he became speechless.

It wasn't an old man who had descended. He was a young man—no, a boy. A boy who should be in the peak of health, but he was creeping out of the electric train with his back bent.

But the reason the station master became speechless wasn't because of the boy's age. The surprise was because of his—Ikki Kurogane's physical condition.

"Haa… haa…."

Hoarse breaths were coming out wildly, and his face was a pallid white. The eyes visible from behind disarrayed forelocks were murky, and no vitality could be felt. And more than anything else—exuded from that image, the perspiration dripping from his chin was unusual. Even with the fierce heat, the electric train had an air conditioner inside. A healthy person would not have such overflowing perspiration.

"Y-You, are you okay?"

"Wh… oh, yes, I'm… fine."

"No, you obviously don't look fine! I'll call an ambulance…!"

Then, the station master looked at Ikki's face in surprise. Although Ikki was in front of his eyes, only now did he recognize the boy described in the news as having played around with the princess of Vermillion. And at that moment, the station master's expression showed obvious disgust. Ikki didn't fail to notice that.

"Thank you for… worrying about me. But… I'm sorry. …I'm in a hurry."

Towards the station master, Ikki bowed his head quickly, and passed by on one side. And like that, he left the station.

"Ah…."

That back was becoming more distant with unsteady, shaky steps. Seeing that back, the station master remembered in bewilderment.

Ikki was the child who the media had claimed was notoriously difficult to deal with during his time in his parents' home.

But somehow… he was extremely polite, wasn't he?

After meeting the person himself, the station master didn't think that this was very similar to the person that the news described.

Part 5

Ikki exited the station, and like that he climbed the hill road toward Hagun Academy. It was a road that went on about one kilometer. A course in which he always went over running with Stella each morning. It was a slope that would not bother the usual Ikki, but as he was now, it was an extraordinarily long distance.

With only shallow breaths, his injured lungs could not bring in oxygen properly.

It hurts….

At least, he wanted to breathe. Opening his mouth to gasp, to capture oxygen, but—

"…Ack, **cough**! **Cough**!"

At the sharp pain that his irritated lungs brought in, all the oxygen he had gotten was spat out. The oxygen in his blood was getting extremely low, and his lips were becoming blue. Becoming hazy from fever and lack of oxygen, Ikki's consciousness was already basically nonexistent. And in place of the ego of the weakened Ikki, there were only thoughts of weakness from hallucinations due to being drugged.

…I'm challenging Raikiri in this kind of condition…?

That kind of thing, it was impossible. It would just be suicide.

I can't win….

That was already obvious. In the first place, the hollow sword of a hollow person like himself, it could not possibly defeat that girl's sword.

Enough, I want to sleep….

Complaints floated through the mind of Ikki who was climbing the deserted hill under the sunlight of the annual heat wave and the sound of cicadas. Right now, he had almost let go of his consciousness. For Ikki, it was an irresistibly sweet temptation.

At that time.

"Ah…."

A small rock snagged on his foot, and Ikki's body struck the asphalt without any defense.

This… isn't good….

If he didn't get up.

If he didn't do that, he wouldn't get to the match in time.

If he didn't get to the match in time, he would lose.

If he lost….

Oh, what difference does it… make?

He sensed his brain melting messily. With his distraction from being drugged and his haziness from fever, what was Ikki doing right now? He couldn't even understand what his goal in doing this was.

And in the midst of his messy consciousness, Ikki grasped something at the edge of his field of view.

…Ah.

It was snow. Before he noticed it, the sky had become dark, and large snowflakes were falling down.

In midsummer? Impossible. But still, it was certainly—

It's… cold….

With his teeth chattering, his body froze. At that chill… Ikki remembered.

…Which reminds me, that day was a snowy day too, wasn't it?

That day, when relatives gathered to celebrate the new year. The day he fled the house, not being able to take it. Nobody coming in spite of his calls, nobody caring about him, cowering in the snow by himself.

Compared to that, I… haven't changed at all.

Really, what was he doing? Without a single expectation, without a single accomplishment, he wasn't able to change a single thing. In the past and in the present, he was cowering in the unending snow. Though even if he said that, becoming as worn out as this, what was he trying to do?

He didn't know. He couldn't remember anything. It's just that he couldn't help his body becoming sluggish, and his eyelids growing heavy—

Ikki's consciousness fell into the cold darkness.

Part 6

The final matches of the selection battles. The number of matches today was less than usual. For the matches happening, they included only the twelve fighters who were undefeated up to now. Therefore, it didn't need to be said that there were many spectators. In particular, the number of people who came to the first practice arena where the confrontation between Raikiri and the Worst One was dreadfully enormous.

The students who came to watch raised their voices in astonishment here and there and everywhere.

"Wow, so many people, huh?"

"Of course there are. Everyone's here to watch the showdown between Raikiri and that Worst One."

"By the way, is that camera I see inside?"

"Because of the news reporters. You know, that story."

"Right, the scandal about the Worst One and the Crimson Princess. But aren't reporters forbidden inside the school?"

"The League was extremely influential in this matter, so maybe there was an exception?"

"Hey… you guys, do you believe that story?"

"There's no doubt they were together. Neither of them denied it, and afterward they were getting along incredibly well."

"And after the match with the Hunter, the Crimson Princess was the one who made a confession with all her heart, you know."

"That's not true! Look, the Worst One's family were the ones who brought the evidence, weren't they? That the Worst One was an unrepentant and notoriously abusive in the past, and is playing around with girls even now?"

"Oh, that?"

"…I don't believe it."

"Truth is, me neither. My Device is a Japanese sword, and I learned how to swing it and do footwork from that guy during lunch breaks, you know."

"Oh, I saw that too. He was doing that in the courtyard, I think. He began doing that with classmates who were pestering him."

"Right, right. I saw that person there, so I can't believe that what the newspapers wrote is true. After all, during this important selection battle season, he was so polite while teaching people even though he got no benefit. How could someone like that be trying to trick the Crimson Princess?"

"But the evidence comes from his own family. In that case, it has to be true, right? Because what reason would they have to lie? They're his own relatives. They might lie to protect him, but there's no reason to make up lies to harm him, right?"

"Yeah, it's hard to imagine that."

Mixing with the activity of the noisy crowd, questions and suspicions about Ikki were exchanged. From the spectator seats, the best place for grinding out such conversations, Nene Saikyou—the petite woman dressed in a kimono who was staring down at the arena—spoke in admiration to Kurono Shinguuji who standing nearby.

"Hm~ph. It looks like the other kids aren't swallowing the news reports whole, huh?"

"Indeed. The people who've had first-hand acquaintance with Kurogane seem the most likely not to do so."

"You can tell he's harmless at a glance, that kid."

"But the truth of it is already inconsequential."

With a sour expression, Kurono spoke that reality.

Indeed, the chain of events surrounding Ikki, the right and wrong of it or the good and bad, was already entrusted to his victory in this duel. Therefore how much Ikki needed to be reformed, how much Akaza's group was wrong, Ikki's method of verifying his righteousness was already limited to victory.

"Really, they really did it, you know. Those bastards."

Even Kurono hadn't anticipated things unfolding this way. He should've endured until Stella's father came? Kurono groaned at her own naivete. And then….

"He he he. Let me accept your compliments."

A deliberately delighted, cloying voice was heard from beside the two of them. The two of them turned as one toward that voice, and there a sweltering barrel of a man was standing and wiping sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Good afternoon. My, today is certainly hot, isn't it~?"

"Committee Chairman Akaza…."

At Akaza's appearance, both Kurono's and Saikyou's handsome faces grimaced together. Naturally, since this wasn't someone they could possibly welcome.

"What do you want from us, you red tanuki[1]?"

Saikyou asked this bluntly with a barbed tone, and Akaza laughed as if saying "Wait, wait, please don't bare your fangs."

"No, no. I have nothing I want from you, but having met Sensei by chance, I just wanted to lead him here so you could talk, you know? Ahh, over here, Sensei."

A petite old man wearing a kimono decorated with a family crest was brought in front of the two of them.

"Ah, we found you at last. In a place as spacious as this, I wouldn't know where you were or what you were doing, ha?"

"Geh, the geezer!"

Saikyou was the first one to react to this person's appearance. And it was justified.

The old man's name was Torajirou Nangou, the God of War. He was a ninety-two year old mage-knight, the oldest in Japan, and the man who was Saikyou's teacher.

"Ho ho ho. My lovable pupil's mouth is as sharp as ever. Well, that's what's cute about you, isn't it?"

"C-Cu… don't say disgusting things!"

"Your face is red, Nene. How about accepting it honestly?"

"Y-You dried-up old geezer, hearing stuff like that from you doesn't make me happy!"

Nene's face as she said that, its bashfulness couldn't be hidden by those words.

Sheesh, that girl can't be honest.

Even though it was already known that this old man was the one Nene had known the longest, and the one she respected the most in the world.

"Kurono-kun, it's also been a long time for us, hasn't it? We haven't met since your belly was big, but did your childbirth end without any problems?"

"Yes, thankfully."

"That's good, very good. However, hnn~, after experiencing childbirth, you've become much more voluptuous, Kurono~.

Around the hips, especially—"

"Geezer! Did you come over here just to leer at my friend!? I'll kill you!"

"Ho ho ho. Nene, you're getting along in years too, so instead of making such shrill noise, you should follow Kurono's example and acquire some knowledge of adult appeal. Otherwise, you'll lose your chance to get married, you know?"

"Nangou-sensei, even if you don't worry about it, surely this girl had lost that chance a long time ago."

"I-I-I can still get married! I'm just having fun with all my might as a single woman! It's just that it would be dumb to be bound to one man! Or rather, why is Kuu-chan on his side!?"

Because Nene is cute whenever Nangou-sensei is around.

It made Kurono want to tease Nene against her better judgment. There were too many moments of Nene not being cute, usually. Well, she wasn't going to tell the person herself that.

"Anyway, Nangou-sensei, why are you here today?"

Disregarding Saikyou's indignant "Don't ignore me!", Kurono asked that of Nangou. Well, this was just being polite. Kurono could guess the main outline of the reason he had come here.

"Of course, I came here to watch Touka's grand performance. … Well, it would be fine to wait until the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival itself, but I had to show up since her opponent is someone of the Kurogane, don't I?"

Like I thought.

Indeed, Nangou was Touka's teacher at the same time he was Nene's. He saw the quick wits of Touka who followed an ancient style, and afterwards taught her his own sword style. Touka's current signature Raikiri was also an arrangement of the old man's own technique, Otogiri[2], for her use. And the reason even more important than that—

"He he he. And because it's the honorable Nangou-sensei's lifetime rival born in the same era, the great hero Ryouma Kurogane, isn't it? It would only be natural to take an interest."

Nangou was ninety-two years old. He was someone who fought alongside the great hero Ryouma Kurogane in the Second World War, and at the same time they were rivals. Ordinarily, the schedule of selection battles in the school was not shown outside, but the fight this time was given as news outside. If he knew that his own favorite pupil and the blood relative of his rival were fighting against each other, it would only be natural for Nangou would show up to see the outcome with his own eyes.

However—

"…But wait, Nangou-sensei. There's a chance that the match today might not happen."

Suddenly, Akaza pasted a repulsive smile on his face, and said that.

"What?"

Kurono's eyebrows moved suddenly at those words. Because she felt an ill-will that did not match his tone of voice. And at almost the same time—

「A notification for everyone in attendance. Although the time has arrived for the match between contender Touka Toudou and contender Ikki Kurogane, contender Ikki Kurogane has still not arrived in the waiting room. As per the selection battle regulations, in the event that contender Kurogane does not arrive in ten minutes, he will be given a loss by default due to absence, so please give us your understanding.」

That announcement echoed within the venue.

"…If I remember correctly, Kurogane was brought here by Committee Chairman Akaza in the same car so there is no need to fetch him. Wasn't that what I was told?"

Certainly, Akaza had told this to Kurono yesterday, and forestall her from taking Ikki. But despite that talk—

"He he he. No, I'm very sorry. I compleeeeetly forgot. I'm sincerely regretful. However, the distance from the League branch to here is not that far. A single person can use the electric train to get here, can't he? …Well, his physical condition seemed extremely bad, so I hope he didn't collapse along the way? He he he."

This son of a bitch….

At the discomfort boiling up inside, Kurono clenched her blood-congested fists.

A small hand took that shaking fist. It was Saikyou's hand. She was looking up at Kurono with her eyebrows raised, and admonished Kurono with a small voice, her lips hidden behind her folding fan.

"Don't be short-tempered, Kuu-chan."

Kurono was silent.

"The details don't matter, since Kurobou accepted the duel. What goes on here isn't important. The things that should be done, all of them come afterwards."

Saikyou was equally pissed off. Knowing that, Kurono unclenched her fist quietly.

"Yeah, that's true, huh?"

And so, the two of them resolved themselves. This battle, whether Ikki won or whether Ikki lost, they wouldn't let this red tanuki leave here alive.

Whereas the red tanuki, Akaza, as if not feeling the killing intent from the two of them, happily looked out at the ring where the match was not starting. Up to this point, everything was going well. Banishing Ikki from the League: if Akaza produced the result that Itsuki desired, Itsuki had given a firm promise to promote Akaza from the position of chairman of the Ethics Committee to chairman of public relations. That wouldn't be in the underground levels of

the branch. He'd be on the bright, visible surface. If that happened….

Then I'll bid farewell to this villain's role today.

The Ethics Committee that was criticized as secret police was a department that held glory during the military police era, but at present it only carried out dark deeds. Decent people would not want to languish in obscurity in this kind of post. Akaza was the same, therefore….

It's regretabble, but I'll crush Ikki-kun completely.

For that outcome, it would be fine even if Ikki died. It wasn't like that was his responsibility.

Part 7

Ikki's consciousness was within the blizzard. Within the incessant snow, while cowering, he recalled his beginning. About that day exactly like this, when he was freezing down to his bones. Where the Ikki Kurogane that existed now started.

Meeting Ryouma Kurogane, he was born from being told for the first time that it was fine to believe in himself, and being very happy about it. Several months later, Ryouma died of old age, but the words he left behind were kept alive inside Ikki. And Ikki decided that someday, he would also become a person who would confer those words to someone like him who was cowering and unmoving in front of the wall of talent, and from that day onward, he continued to fight against his own limits.

If he had not had that meeting, he would not exist today. The encounter with Ryouma was something Ikki was proud of. But—

「Was that meeting right?」

A voice like his own whispered something in his ear.

「That meeting, did it bring you anything but agony and loneliness?"

Gradually, scenes of the past rose in Ikki's addled mind.

During elementary school. Himself as a child, continuously swinging *Intetsu* while bleeding from hands that had skin peeling off. Those days, was what he did the right thing to do? And he didn't even know if he had truly become strong. In those days where he knew nothing, he had learned how to wield a sword from illustrations in reference books. No matter how much he had

reached his limits, there was no one willing to instruct him. Therefore, he had stealthily peeped on the children of the branch family from a thicket, and continuously imitated them. That was… very lonesome, he remembered well. The gentleness and strictness shown to other children by the sword instructors who came to the Kurogane household, they were never shown to him, and he had felt that pain whether he wanted to or not.

—What came up next was the scene in a dojo. Ikki who was in middle school had traveled to a dojo to gain skill. Eventually, there was one scene. A one-on-one fight. Even though he had to make that agreement, the instant the opening signal was given, other disciples would strike him all at once, and he would be held down at that spot.

「The experience of making fun of challenging a dojo, we'll make sure you don't have it a second time!」

And saying so, the middle school club president who was Ikki's opponent took Ikki's hand and broke the pinky with all his might. While guffawing, he did the same to the rest of Ikki's fingers. There was not a single person there to help Ikki. While one and all were laughing in real fun, every single finger was broken. The pain and fear of being abused at that time, it was seared into his memories even now.

—The last scene that appeared was… one year ago.

「Hey hey. Not resisting won't prove your strength, you know? I, the Hunter, said I would personally be your opponent. At least counterattack!」

He, who had been filled with holes by Kirihara, was stared at by the cold eyes of the teachers.

And—

「Sorry, Kurogane-kun. I can't stay friends with you anymore.」

The words from the friend who drew away from him….

—The voice that was like Ikki's whispered something.

「And now, here you are on the ground in this kind of place. It's because you wanted to prove Ryouma Kurogane's irresponsible words. You're exactly as Father said, if a person lives within his means, this kind of thing wouldn't happen. Nor would you be dragging along this dying body, clawing your way to the place where you'll fight to the death. A desire beyond your means will only bring you unhappiness. For people, there are domains that correspond to each of them. For those who reach for more, there are only pain and solitude. So? Have you had enough? Then be be reasonable, and relax. The nonsense of the departed, that doesn't have to bind you forever. If you just let yourself fall asleep here, everything will be settled. Ryouma Kurogane's words won't torment you ever again. So—」

Just rest already.

Yeah, that's right. He should just rest. If he continued like this, there would only be bitterness. If he closed his eyes, he would be happy. He would surely be happy. He understood that.

He under…stood… that… but—

"Ahhh AAAHHHHH AAAAAHHHHHHH!"

A roar came forth from his festering throat, and Ikki raised his body up from the asphalt. And step by step, with each step hardening his stride, he continued through the blizzard up the slope.

「Just stop already. Why do you keep hurting yourself?」

The voice asked that question. The answer to that, Ikki didn't know himself. With his muddied mind and recollections, he couldn't hold a single thought or memory.

But—since a while ago, something had been continually reflected in his consciousness.

Red… flame.

Gently swaying, spreading incandescence, flame-like red hair.

Whose hair was that? Whose back was that? Right now, Ikki couldn't even remember.

But—every time he caught a fleeting glimpse, his heart couldn't help but be stirred. Even though he didn't know who that was, just because that hair swayed, the heat in his frozen body burned, and his body that had used up all its energy became stimulated.

「Just rest. Someone as hopeless as you will only be defeated by that Raikiri. What can you do if you go there? What can you do as you are now?」

He didn't know about that. In the first place, Ikki didn't know what he was trying to do going there, or where he was even going.

But—

Aah, but—

There was a heat burning in his chest. Feeling that, Ikki remembered only one thing.

I made a promise.

「So… go… high… knigh….」

Though he didn't quite recall the contents, it was a precious vow, made to a precious person.

That wasn't all. He could hear a voice. What it was saying, he couldn't tell. But that familiar voice like a great commotion was pushing him onward.

Then—I have to….

That was Ikki's answer. At that answer, the thing that had been throwing taunts at him heaved a breath of disgust.

「Is that how it is? To the bitter end, you're going to continue your pain, I see.」

On a blackened face, it gave a twisted smile.

「However—it's futile.」

At that moment—

Ah….

At the exact moment he reached Hagun Academy's main gate, Ikki knee collapsed, and his body tumbled to the ground. Whatever Ikki's determination, his body had reached its limit. He could not advance farther than that. He could not stand up anymore. This was the limit of the person named Ikki Kurogane.

「You're finished, you know.」

Ikki's body would fall like a marionette whose strings had been cut, and that body would lay on the ground. The ground that he would not rise from a second time.

—That was what would happen.

However, at the moment he fell.

With a **thump**.

Arms full of warm and gentle strength caught his falling body. With those strong arms, a trembling subdued voice said something.

"…Welcome back, Onii-sama."

That sweet bell-like voice called forth the memory of a single person from his slowly collapsing recollection. The memory of Ikki's only cherished little sister. That name was—

"Shizu…ku…."

Part 8

Shizuku, who had caught Ikki's collapsing body in her arms, spoke to him in a hoarse voice.

"…Last night, I heard what Touka-san said, and it's been in my head the entire time."

Whether she should stop her brother, or not.

To speak Shizuku's honest feelings, she thought she wanted to stop him. It was enough already. Her brother had already fought on more than enough. She didn't want her brother to be hurt anymore. To have such bitter experiences. Stop trying to become a knight, and come back to the Kurogane house with her. For her brother, it might be a prison. But she herself was there for her brother. She herself could give her brother love as a mother, a sister, a friend, a lover. She could give her brother whatever he wanted. Therefore… she should let her brother rest.

"…But even if I think that, I can't help but hesitate about stopping Onii-sama. Because when Onii-sama is at this school, he laughs like he is truly happy."

The times he was at their family home was unimaginable. Yes, he smiled at the young and immature Shizuku, but never smiled, not once, for himself. The smiling face that her brother had earned for himself little by little. To take that away from him, she could not do so no matter the reason.

"So I'll make a gamble. Now that Onii-sama came here by his own will—I will send him off to battle with the biggest cheers I can offer."

Along with Shizuku's words—a commotion arose.

"That's right, Senpai! If it's you, you'll definitely win!!!"

"The match hasn't started yet! Hurry!!!"

"Kurogane-kun! There's just a little more to the arena grounds! Do your best!!!"

"Ikki-kuuun! Fight—!!!"

"Just one more push! Show us what you got—!!!"

These were the cheers that Shizuku had run around gathering in order to send her brother forth. Friends, classmates, pupils, former opponents—many students had been waiting for Ikki's arrival at the main gate. And to Ikki who showed a face like he couldn't believe what he was seeing, Shizuku spoke.

"Onii-sama. Among this group, no one asked anything. Because for all of us, we can easily imagine what has happened to corner you like this. But please don't forget. Onii-sama, you're definitely… not alone. You certainly might have been alone in the beginning. That time might have been very, very long. But right now, all of these people are supporting you. Even Stella-san and Alice who couldn't be here because of their own matches, they are praying for your victory. You, the Worst One, are the hero of every one of us."

So—

"Please fight. And please win!"

Part 9

The cheers from Shizuku and the others. They… certainly reached the consciousness of Ikki who was alone in the blizzard. Ikki in his blurry vision confirmed it firmly.

"Please fight. And please win!"

His silver-haired little sister was there.

"Senpai, I'm going to put a special feature about you on the next wall newspaper, so you absolutely can't lose! Please!"

His lovely classmate with the glasses was there.

"Kurogane-kun. This is a critical moment, you know!"

A tall and beautiful former pupil was there.

"Sensei believes in you. You're not a boy who would lose in this kind of place."

"The student council president is stupidly strong, but you won against me, so let's see your strength!"

"Yeah, what she said."

"Ikki-kun! We absolutely believe that will win!"

The other students who he taught the sword to, as well as the upperclassmen who had always helped him. The classmates who he studied together with. The teacher who had let him into the academy. The worthy opponents who he had competed against for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival—

Many people were calling Ikki's name. From that sight, a single

conviction was born inside of Ikki.

Ahh, at last I understand.

The thing supporting his body that had already been driven past its limits, what that thing was. It was their voices, and their hopes.

People who loved him. People who admired him. And—people whose dreams he had snatched away. The people who were gathered here right now, each and every one of them was entrusting some form of hope to Ikki. That was why they were calling Ikki's name. And those voices, those hopes, they were pushing Ikki onward.

Since the time Utakata told him that 「Between the two of you, the weight of responsibility you're carrying is different」, he had thought he had nothing burdening him, but that was a mistake. His own limits had been exceeded, and Ikki was barely aware of his own existence. The things burdening him now, were the desires entrusted to him.

At some point, I became that kind of person…

The moment he gained that conviction, Ikki felt the fire burning in his heart. **Babump, babump**, the blood flowing inside his body grew hot, and his strength returned. His collapsed thoughts, memories, they certainly returned to their original form, and his consciousness was cleared.

—He would fight. Of course he would. If hopes were entrusted to him, he could never give up of his own accord.

And more than anything else, he had something with that girl with the flame-like hair who wasn't here—a promise with Stella.

「So let's go together, the two of us, as high as knights can go.」

Right now, he could clearly remember. That precious vow. In order to fulfill that, he could not let things end here!

"…Thanks, Shizuku. Kusakabe-san. Ayatsuji-san. Tomaru-san. Saijou-san. Oreki-sensei. And all of you here."

—At some point, the blizzard had ended.

Giving his thanks, Ikki separated from Shizuku and walked on with his own feet. With his head held high, by the strength that everyone had brought him, to the place of the decisive battle.

His heart was no longer uneasy.

「Someone as hopeless as you will only be defeated by that Raikiri.」

The words that the weak self inside Ikki had spoken. To that, he could answer clearly now.

—Be defeated?

They were burdened with the same weight, and they were knights of equal status. He didn't know if he could win. In truth, she was a formidable enemy. Was she an opponent he could defeat with this physical condition?

The more he thought about it, the more disadvantages he could see, and only that. But he would do the only thing he could. Because for the sake of everyone who gave him strength to move forward step by step, he had the duty to do that.

"Well, off I go—"

At that moment—

"Ikki!!!"

A voice resounded loudly in the summer air. Very, very strongly, and beautifully—a voice more lovely than the notes of any music.

Part 10

"Stella!"

"Thank goodness… I got here in time…!"

Crying out and rushing toward in before his eyes, the fiery-haired girl coughed something as she wheezed. At that entry, Shizuku raised her voice in surprise from her position behind Ikki.

"Wha—S-Stella-san! You should be in the middle of your match right now…!"

Yes, that was the reason for Shizuku's surprise. Stella was also a candidate for representative at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival who had been undefeated up to her final match. She was just like Arisuin who hadn't come to this place, someone who must be conducting a match at this time. But despite that, what was she doing here?

Stella didn't respond with an answer.

Instead, she demonstrated it with action.

She took something out and thrust it in front of Ikki's eyes, and said this.

"Ikki, like I promised, I'm now a Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representative!"

The thing that Stella had brought out. It was a medal that proved she was a Hagun Academy representative.

That's right, she had already finished her match. With the selection battles' fastest record, a KO at three seconds from match start, against her equally undefeated opponent. All of it was… for the sake of being in time for this moment.

She was always thinking about this. What she should do. For the sake of Ikki who was fighting alone, what she could do. And the answer she had produced was to protect the vow they made. Protect it, come out to greet him. That would surely become courage for him. So—

"So Ikki, you win too! And let's go together! As high as knights can go!"

At those words, Ikki felt the corners of his eyes heating up. Sheesh, his sweetheart was… such a wonderful girl. Encouraging him who had used up all of his energy, not just heading him all the way here, but also bringing him such great valor at this moment. Doing such a forceful thing.

I'm in love with her. That's something I'm proud of.

In that case, he needed to prove he was deserving. To not be unfavorably compared to this strong girl, to become proud of himself.

—To do what he could only do.

That faint-hearted spirit, she had scattered it from inside him with just a few words. Therefore he changed the words he had left with the people around him.

It wasn't going to be "off I go".

"I'm going to win!"

Part 11

"Okay, I see. I understand. Thank you for informing me."

Giving his thanks, Utakata lowered the student datapad from his ear. And he reported to Touka who was sitting on a chair in the waiting room with her eyes closed and her concentration heightened.

"A message from Renren. …Kouhai-kun came."

"…I see."

Touka returned a short reply, and hung her head. Because her hanging forelocks hid her eyes, Utakata could not guess her feelings. Ikki had come to this place. In front of this, even if Touka had been avoiding it, what was she—

"…Ha ha."

For an instant, Utakata felt the hairs on his entire body stand on end. Because Touka's lips had twisted in joy. With sounds of crackling, Touka's excitement had electrified the atmosphere, giving birth to lightning. At that sight, Utakata gulped.

…Her switch has been completely flipped.

He hadn't seen Touka like this since the fight with Moroboshi at last year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

Yes, urging him not to fight was Touka's gentleness in worrying about her underclassman's body. But… in this world of battle, one could not reach the heights of the best four in the entire country with gentleness alone. The brutality and ferocity that submerges the enemy in a sea of blood. That was also one of this girl's sides.

But then, that was a side she usually rarely shows—

But alas, Ikki had brought out Touka's seriousness. The pride of the boy named Ikki Kurogane, he had made Touka recognize him as a formidable enemy. Touka as she was now would likely never go easy on him. She would undoubtedly rush at the half-dead Worst One. Ikki already didn't have a one-in-ten-thousand chance of winning.

「Contender Touka Toudou. The match will begin shortly, so please go to the entrance.」

"…Well, I'm going, Uta-kun."

Slowly rising from the chair, Touka passed through the door that connected to the entrance gate. Utakata, who saw her back filled to the brim with willpower, felt sympathy for the opponent on the verge of death who had no choice but to fight her at her most excited.

It's pitiable, but try to think of it as sorrow brought by bad luck—Worst One.

Part 12

「Okay～ everyone in attendance. We've kept you waiting for a while. And now—the last match of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival will begin! From the red gate, it's Raikiri, who went undefeated nineteen out of nineteen matches! Our student council president has shown us an overwhelming strength that won through everything without a scratch. In the records of Hagun Academy, how much have we cheered on her continuously brilliant form? She is the pride of Hagun! Our shining star! In order for this beautiful star to continue on the road of glory toward her last Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, she has come to this battlefield! It's third year contender Touka Toudou, the Raikiri! Right now, with everyone's anticipations on her shoulders, she's standing in the ring of battle!」

Touka who was standing in the ring. With her head held straight and proud, her standing figure staring at the blue gate was surely majestic.

"Amazing concentration, isn't it? Just from that, I can feel shocks on my skin."

Even to Stella who was watching from afar, that strength of will was fully transmitted.

However, Shizuku who had been in the presence of Raikiri's strength before didn't feel just that. The moment that Touka appeared in the ring, a shiver of terror rushed through her whole body. She felt a fear that made her want to avert her eyes.

However—Shizuku didn't avert her eyes. Hugging her shivering shoulders, she endured the urge to flee and stared down on the field.

"Shizuku, are you okay?"

"…Honestly, I'm not, but since Onii-sama is fighting on, there's no way I'll leave this place. I will see this match to the end. No matter what the outcome."

「And from the blue gate, one who was similarly undefeated in nineteen battles. But it's unexpected for him to walk the same road as Raikiri! Without taking anyone as partner, without recognition from anyone—he is the one lone wolf who was left behind at the bottom of the earth. However… he has crawled up! Against the Crimson Princess! Against the Hunter! Against Runner's High! Blowing past Hagun's famous knights one by one! Now, there's no one in Hagun who doesn't know his name! The strongest F-Rank that is Hagun's pride! First year contender Ikki Kurogane, the Worst One! Baring his fangs at the heavens, now he's on this stage of battle to devour a star!」

And after that, Ikki was visible in the blue gate. Facing the battlefield with sturdy steps without the appearance of being half-dead, Ikki's back was straight and dignified as he faced Touka.

However—

"Wha, what's that? …Isn't the mood different from usual?"

"Y-Yeah… even though his face is the same as always."

"Looking at it, I get a scary feeling…."

Toward Ikki's form that should be the same as always, the venue made a stir. Even if words didn't come out, everyone felt something in his standing posture. And among them, there were people who definitely recognized it.

"Oh ho? That's Touka's opponent? I see… he's strong, right?"

"Nangou-sensei, you can tell?"

"Certainly so. He's making an absolutely strained expression. That youngster, he's resolved even to die here, yes? Even the audience is overwhelmed by his resolve. I didn't know that a man like this

existed among the Kurogane, but… this is becoming a rather interesting match, it seems."

"Is that so~? It might not be on his face, but the color of fatigue is deep. Kuu-chan, with his condition like that, is there any chance for him to challenge Touka and win?"

"He he he. Whether there is or there isn't, he has no choice but to challenge her, you know? Whatever the reason, this is a duel."

Disregarding Akaza's disruption from the side, Kurono covered her face and replied.

"…Honestly, the situation is quite bad. He can probably swing the sword properly once or twice. …But that is why Kurogane will move cautiously. Because he probably already knows Raikiri's killing direction."

"Hmm? Even things like Raikiri's killing direction?"

She was thinking of ignoring him again for a second, but having that oily man heap questions on her also gave an ill feeling. Because she thought so, Kurono explained it to Akaza who was standing across the way.

"…Raikiri is a fast sword draw. Namely, it's a technique that can't attack if the sword isn't returned to the scabbard. By moving in-and-out with fine repetitive motions, he had render Toudou's Raikiri or other Noble Arts useless, and if he draws her sword out, then at least in that instant Raikiri can't be launched. Kurogane's chance to win would be in that moment. …However, in order to create that chance, he needs to control a battle of attrition with that battered body of his."

It was a disadvantageous battle. But on the other hand, if he went for victory impatiently the chance of success was completely nil. His opponent was still Raikiri, who boasted of invincibility in close range. If he plunged in straightforwardly, he would fall prey to her trump card without a doubt. Because Ikki's Ittou Shura, though it encompassed many years of body strengthening, was still not enough to break through Raikiri. For that reason, there was only a

battle of attrition. That was the same opinion that Saikyou held.

But—there was one knight with a different view.

"Ho ho, I see. Kurono-kun, you see this match riding on a battle of attrition?"

It was Nangou. The falcon-sharp eyes inside his wrinkled eyelids shined with a sharp gaze, and he spoke.

"I see that this battle—will be decided with one stroke."

In the outer stands, people became rowdy at the two figures on the stage. Within that upheaval, inside the ring, Touka gave some words as she faced Ikki.

"Kurogane-kun. I have to apologize to you."

"…Apologize?"

"I was thinking all this time that you shouldn't come to this place today. Thinking that, I begged your sister to urge you to not show up. But… even as I did such a hypocritical thing, the girl that I am… seeing you before my eyes right now, I can't help but look forward to this fight…!"

Ikki was silent.

"Kurogane-kun, I know that you're covered in wounds right now. I can see how tired you are. But still, I can't help but be excited. Because from the moment I came came across you, I've always, always thought that—I want to fight you!"

With that bit of gossip, a smile grew on her face, and she took a stance. A flash of lightning crossed the air, and that lightning coverged on Touka's hand, taking the shape of *Narukami*. She had a face that said she couldn't wait for the match to start anymore.

Facing that, Ikki Kurogane also—

"—About that, I'm the same."

Announcing that, he summoned his beloved black Japanese sword in right hand. Indeed. He was also thinking that the entire time. Raikiri and himself. Which of them was stronger? That he would probably fight with this person. Worrying about it sometimes, he was even sometimes caught in an intangible mist. But right now, he saw that she was very straightforward.

Standing as knights in this place, neither you, nor I, nor the people pushing us forward want to see a single sword being swung in shame. So I promise you this."

Saying so, Ikki raised the sword he held in one hand, and thrusted the point at Touka.

"With my great weakness, I will break your invincibility…!"

He swore that he would absolutely win. Of course, because that was why he had come here.

「The two great rivals have exchanged some words, and taken their Devices in their hands. The girl who is striding toward the summit, and the boy who's crawling up from below. Who is truly the strongest? With the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representative position at stake, the last fight begins! Everyone, please cheer for them! LET'S GET STARTED!!!」

Part 13

The moment of the signal that raised the curtain. Everyone there saw something they could not believe. At the same time the buzzer sounded the beginning of the match, Ikki pulled forth blue light from his body, and ran at Touka.

「Wh-Wh-Wh-What is going on!? Contender Kurogane suddenly used his trump card, Ittou Shura!」

The inside of the venue stirred at that fact. Ikki had employed Ittou Shura at the beginning of the match, which he had never done before.

It was natural. This technique had a strict limit of one minute. It could be nullified just by running away. For that reason, Ikki never used it without first exhaustively understanding the scope of his opponents' powers.

But now, Ikki had thrown away that attitude. He had no stamina left to draw out his opponent's ability bit by bit. Was he too much in a hurry to decide the match because of that fatigue?

In any case—

That decision is reckless, Kurogane…!

Kurono ground her teeth at the sight before her eyes. This was too foolish a choice. While his body had stamina, the match was still in question. The amount of risk could be prepared for. If things became favorable, such tactics might be good, but….

Do you understand? Your opponent is Raikiri!

A member of the country's best four. It was impossible to beat her with a suicidal attack out of desperation. Would he be cut down by

Raikiri, or would she escape with her lightning speed? Whichever it was, she couldn't see Ikki winning with this choice. At that fact, both Kurono and Saikyou who was watching at the match at the same time had grim expressions. And influential students like Shizuku and Arisuin were the same. It was too thoughtless. Their expressions twisted in grief. But among them… the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion—

"Jeez. Even with your life as a knight on the line, you're such an impossible person, aren't you Ikki?"

And she smiled just a little.

She understood.

Why did Ikki choose to do this? Raikiri was going to slash with her sword draw. In that case, he should attack during the draw itself. It was only then that Raikiri could kill.

Even I know that, so Ikki must have realized it.

But Ikki did not choose that. Why? Because he judged that his stamina would not permit that tactic?

No. It was—not anything as clever as that.

Stella understood that, and she was right. Ikki had—

I had decided all along…!

Ever since he encountered Touka. For the time he would defeat her, he had been putting together his strategy. Of course, that included the electromagnetic sword draw, Raikiri, that was Touka's signature technique as a knight. And when challenging her, how could he win without being beaten by it?

In truth, his body was at its limit. Though he had enough magic power left that performing body strengthening with Ittou Shura was not a problem, he could not draw out his stamina anymore. Swinging a sword properly, it was probably limited to one time.

But that was fine. It was enough. If he struck with all his might, one slash was enough. He would not feint. He would not spend his stamina uselessly. Running forward in a straight line over the shortest distance, he would put all he had right now into his blade and send it forth! And he would defeat it. The Raikiri that Touka Toudou was proud of!

And to Touka, who rose above this place whirling with this intrigue, the greatest sincerity that he could show—

This is my personal challenge—!!!"

Whatever the unfavorable conditions, it would be a match that didn't leave any regrets. He would not show himself leaving his opponent regrets. With that spirit in his heart, scattering the glow of his life, Ikki ran forward with the wind coiling around him.

Seeing that— Touka Toudou perceived his feelings.

「With my great weakness, I will break your invincibility!」

The words he had said before the match, it was in genuine seriousness.

She didn't need Reverse Sight to read his body signals. The soul that was approaching informed her eloquently. Ikki Kurogane would make one slash in this match, to decide the last stroke. His aim was to intercept the Raikiri she would unleash.

In that case, the match is simple.

She would feint with Raikiri, retreat a long way back, and have him miss with all his strength. And if she teased the exhausted Ikki from outside his range, he would not be able to do a thing. The match would be her win—that kind of thing….

Don't joke around!

Touka didn't even glance at that plan. Raikiri, which had not been broken in close range even once yet, dominated this territory. If an enemy invaded, what feudal lord would shamelessly flee his domain? Close range was Touka's strongest distance. If she ran

away, where would she fight from? More than anything else—against someone pushing his heavily wounded body yet still using all his might, if she discarded her invincibility in the face of such a proud knight's challenge, how could she boast of that kind of victory!?

Ahh, that's right.

I don't want to just be Hagun Academy's strongest! I'm going to defeat this proud knight, and go on to become a Seven Stars Sword King!

In that case—

I'll take you on! With my invincible Raikiri—!!!

She spread her stance, and sent a flash of lightning into the scabbard that held *Narukami*. She prepared her trump card. To throw out the blow that brought down every opponent without exception. That posture of readiness to draw a sword, Touka intercepted Ikki who was approaching with coiling wind around him. She was the same as her opponent, risking everything on one slash!

Mutually and reciprocally, carrying themselves proudly, fighting fair and square. This was the righteous path of knights!

And—right now, two knights were confronting each other on that path.

Ikki had thrown out the fastest of his seven personal techniques. The seventh secret sword, *Raikou*. With a speed that showed no swordsmanship, it was an invisible sword. That speed, it was like lightning that drilled into earth within the blink of an eye.

But even so, the name of the technique meeting that Raikou was coincidentally *Raikiri*. An artful sword draw that splits even descending lightning.

The speeds of both parties were that of peerless superhumans. In that case, the decision of which one was superior was left to the weight of hope that each sword carried. The prayers of other people who prayed for their victory wholeheartedly. And the hopes of themselves, wanting to win against the enemy in front of their eyes. All of that was entrusted to the sword of their souls.

"AHHHHHHH!!!"

"YAHHHHHHH!!!"

The two knights put their entire bodies into it, and followed through with their slashes! The flash of lightning from the attack released by steel. The mutual strike that crossed the shortest distance—Raikiri was just slightly faster!

—Not good!

Ikki knew this.

—This wasn't enough!

Before his eyes that already could not perceive color, a blade of shining plasma was approaching. Before that speed and power—

—He couldn't reach it!

He would be defeated. The Raikiri that followed through would show neither hesitation nor mercy. A complete swing that would kill without remorse. Such a beautiful, beautiful swordsmanship.

Touka Toudou, Raikiri… this girl was truly strong!

—But so what!?

He already knew that. That she was strong, and that he was inferior to most, all of it. However, did Ikki turn his eyes away from that reality?

No!

He continued to fight. He did not retreat one step from that unbearable reality. That was why he knew. Because Ikki was like that, he knew what he should be doing right now.

If he was inferior, he should gather his strength. If he was imperfect, he should strain his power.

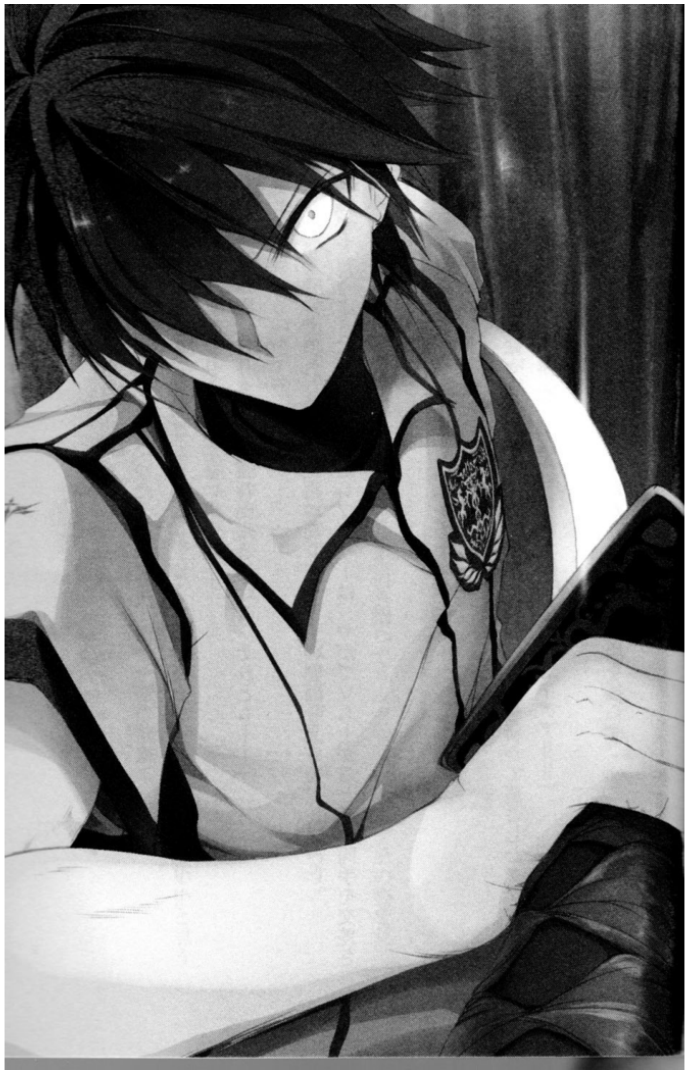
One minute was too long. Right now, he just needed one second!

—So be it, he'll sharpen his soul.

Vision, taste, hearing, touch, smell—right now he didn't need any of them. In this instant, he didn't even need to breathe. Abandoning all of those things, he concentrated the strength left over.

All of his flesh. All of his brain. All of his blood. All of his cells, everything from them.

His personal vitality, stamina, magic power, potential, he mustered all that he had—



—And for an instant, he broke past his limits!!!

The flash of lighting from colliding steel. That air that was blasted away. The collision gave birth to lightning and thunder that could be witnessed hundreds of miles away, carrying away all color and sound—

crack

In the long silence afterward, the shrill sound of steel breaking echoed in the venue.

And then… the sound of someone falling.

The spectators who had shut their eyes at the dazzling radiance timidly opened their eyes again, and looked toward the ring.

The thing that had been broken was—*Narukami*.

The one who had fallen midway on the righteous path of knights was Touka Toudou, the Raikiri.

Part 14

「I-It's broken!!! H-How can it be!? With just one intersection of blades, merely one entanglement! In that instant, Touka Toudou's *Narukami*! Her Raikiri! They were broken!!! Contender Toudou has fallen in the ring and isn't even twitching! Now, the referee is rushing up! Can she continue!? If not—」

The huge audience held their breath as they watched the referee approach Touka. The referee who leaned over her examined her for a brief period, and before long, stood back up with both hands making a cross.

「The referee's judgment is that she can't continue! The match is over! What an end to the fight! What a conclusion! The crossing slashes were only off by millimeters! And with those millimeters, Hagun Academy's strongest knight has fallen! The one still standing in the ring is first year contender, the Worst One, Ikki Kurogane!!!」

The moment the winner's name was called, cheers broke out and shook the hall. The huge audience raised their voices in astonishment.

「It, it can't be….」

「H-He really won! He really did it! Against Raikiri!」

「I can't believe it! The student president lost in close range….!」

「It's the first time I've ever seen a Device get broken…. Is the president still alive?」

「Eeeeek! Ikki-kun, you're the best—!」

The hall turned into a mixing pot of excitement. Amidst the incessant cheers, Ikki dragged his body from the ring. Seeing that, Stella broke into a run immediately. The place she was going to was the blue gate. She was probably going to meet Ikki.

"Shizuku-chan, you're not going?"

Kagami who was watching it with the silver-haired girl asked that suddenly. But Shizuku shook her head a little at the question.

"Could it be, you're restraining yourself for Stella-chan? I think it's fine for you to go with her today, though."

"That's not… it…."

"Shizuku-chan?"

Coughing, Shizuku sat down right there firmly. Seeing that, Kagami also realized it. It wasn't not that Shizuku wouldn't go. She was unable to move because of shock.

Her beloved brother had dragged his body that was on the verge of death to appear in this fight. The enemy had struck at her brother with full force, showing no hesitation or mercy. Although the result was the Ikki had won, it had truly been dangerous. If a single thing had gone wrong, Ikki's head would've flown in that instant. That tension, and the relief that was loosened, they had probably stolen all energy from Shizuku.

Right now—

"…It's great… that he's safe…. It's great!"

At that relief, Shizuku had fallen onto her seat, and was now shedding tears. Well, that was understandable. Because Shizuku had been strained since last night.

However, speaking of the risky match—the truth was different.

"Did you see that, Nene?"

"Of course I saw that. Sheesh, what an outrageous man Kuro-bou is."

The two mage-knights looking down on the ring from the top floor of the spectator seats had noticed it. They had seen it with their own eyes.

Raikou and Raikiri. The thunder of two steel swords colliding, and the moment that happened.

—Ikki had accelerated even more.

"Ittou Shura, which spent everything of oneself in one minute, didn't win against Raikiri. Kurogane himself understood that. So that guy, he spent everything himself in one sword swing instead of one minute! With astounding concentration, he concentrated his 'strongest single minute', and magnified his physical strength in a many-fold leap, and added swing speed and power…!"

Compared to burning his stamina using the usual Ittou Shura to run forward, Ikki had spent the stamina of running a hundred meters at the first step instead just then. That was entirely beyond the domain of humans. It was not the realm of a man who fell into the realm of the shura. Exceeding limits beyond limits. A… demon that exceeded humanity. If it needed a name—

Ittou Rasetsu[3].

"But that's just an ordinary mechanism. The result of the battle was decided by something else, you know."

"Nangou-sensei…."

"Geezer, what are you saying?"

"The Raikiri that Touka unleashed. That was a slash that didn't have the resolve to kill that Kurogane youngster. What I saw was the highest, most beautiful sword stroke without a hint of hesitation. And that, make no mistake, was faster than the youngster's long sword. But… that youngster. He improved in the instant of reaching

his limit. In that last moment. In order to beat the stronger Touka. …Perhaps, that youngster came here to do that the entire, entire time. Having nothing, being given nothing, while constantly under siege he continued to believe in his own potential even in a struggle to the death. Continuing to hone himself. Faster than himself at one minute. Stronger than himself at one second. In that narrow span, that difference. Touka undoubtedly drew strength to her limit. But that youngster, in this battle, had changed his own limit. …His spirit in continuing to change his own potential without slacking off, this victory was born of that."

Saying that, Nangou tightened the wrinkled skin around his narrowed eyes, and said—

"…That boy resembles him."

Looking forward with a gaze that seemed to see an old acquaintance, he watched the back of Ikki who was leaving the ring.

But, at the side,

"I-Impossible! How can something so stupid happen! That kid was half dead! For this to happen even then, something must be wrong! Ahh, of course, something isn't right! It was a mistake! Who could accept this kind of outcome!?"

Only Akaza could not accept the situation before his eyes, and he took off running with a scream.

At his round back running away with thumping noises, Saikyou asked.

"Kuu-chan. Is it okay not to chase him? That's not very satisfying."

It wouldn't be satisfying. Kurono was of the same opinion. But….

"…Honestly, I thought about doing various things to pay him back, but seeing Kurogane's fight has made me somewhat ridiculous. It's probably fine to let him go. At any rate, that man can't do anything now. If he tried to do anything, it's already too late anyway. Things have already escaped his grasp. A champion on the level of the

whole country. Bonds to family. Outrageous attacks. Absurd duels. Ikki Kurogane has taken all of that head-on—and cut through them with one slash."

There was no one left who could object to that conclusion. And that situation had been captured by news cameras. In the moment that Raikiri, among the best four of the whole country, was beaten by the Worst One.

"So no matter how much the Kurogane family tries to persecute Kurogane, it's already irrelevant. The society can't strike him anymore. Because with this fight, the Worst One—no, the Uncrowned Sword King, will have his fame spreading through the entire world."

Part 15

The cheers are… far away.

As if they were just the sound of rain outside a window. Ikki thought so. His consciousness was completely separated from his flesh. If he relaxed his attention just a little, he would tumble to the floor immediately.

No, it was already fine to tumble down. Because the match had been decided, and Ikki had won. But even so, Ikki hastened forward.

—There was somewhere he wanted to go. There was someone he wanted to meet.

There's something I want to convey. …At this moment.

So he walked. With the cheers at his back, he passed through the blue gate.

"Ikki…!"

The person he wanted to meet, she had come to meet him as well.

…I'm grateful.

Because honestly, walking all the way to the spectator seats would be troublesome. Stella was welcoming Ikki with her arms spread.

Ikki collapsed into her bosom. Stella hugged Ikki into her voluptuous chest, and—

"Well done… Ikki…!"

She hiccuped. On her face, tears were dripping down.

"Were you that… worried?"

"I was! Of course I was! *sob* You were taken away and didn't come back for weeks! And when you came back, you came back half dead! And yet you did something absurd like challenging Raikiri in a head-to-head contest… what kind of idiot are you! Unbelievable! Stupid stupid stupid!"

Ha ha… my retort was exposed.

"But… I'm an idiot too."

Hmm?

"Because Ikki, who continues to challenge like that, is the one I love."

Saying that, Stella hugged Ikki with greater force. From the skin squeezing him hard, Ikki could feel Stella's warmth.

Ahh, this heat.

This heat, it gave strength many times over to his frozen body. That time, when he fell in the middle the blizzard, he thought it was truly hopeless. That not a bit of strength remained in his body. However, this heat had given him strength to go on. Even though he couldn't recall her name, his hopeless body had still gotten up.

…Thank you.

If Stella hadn't been there, there was no way he could've come here. Being decisively cast aside by his father, sinking under the despair from that, he would've been buried under the blizzard. But if this girl was there… he could get up. If this girl was there, he could continue to fight.

So he would say it. He had decided. When the fight ended, if he won—he would say this to Stella.

"…Stella."

Ikki took a single deep breath, and hugged Stella with all the

strength he had left.

"I want us to be a family."

A few words. The affection he felt, all of it was loaded onto them, and delivered to her. Decisive words that he had never spoken

before. Words that said the relationship between them was already not that of ordinary lovers.

In an instant, Stella's body that was embracing him trembled.

But that was only one instant.

Immediately, Stella hugged Ikki's body even harder, and said—

"Yes. Ikki, please make me your bride."

With a voice that sounded like she would break into tears, but with a bashfulness truly filled by delight, she gave him her answer. The moment he heard those words, Ikki's heart was wrapped by relief—and he finally let go of his consciousness.

"Ikki…? No, Ikki! Hold it together!"

Losing strength, Ikki's body leaned languidly on her. Even though he was breathing… it was terribly weak. She could tell he was in a dangerous condition with a glance.

And furthermore Stella noticed it. Ikki's entire body, it was bleeding underneath his clothes. The body he had strengthened many hundred-fold. It was already beyond the range that a human body could withstand.

If I don't take him to the infirmary quickly….

"Stooooop!"

But in front of Stella who was trying to carry Ikki to the infirmary, a barrel-like man was standing. With bloodshot eyes, and greasy sweat dripping down all of his face, it was Mamoru Akaza.

Those eyes had no sanity in them anymore. He had failed. Therefore, he would have to take responsibility for that failure. If so, there was no way he was going to be promoted. It was obvious that he would lose even his current position.

Unless he did something to erase that.

That impatience, it took away all the sense from this middle-aged man. Akaza had taken out a hatchet Device, and approached the unconscious Ikki.

"He he he! Please wait a moment, Princess! Please leave that boy to me! I must have a duel with him right now~! In truth, the one who was to be his opponent was not Touka Toudou, but me! That was a promise between men! So give that boy to me immediately—huh?"

In that moment, Stella disappeared from before Akaza's sight. No, not disappeared—it wasn't that he had lost sight of her, but that Stella had stepped in between intervals of his awareness.

The ancient martial arts footwork, Trackless Step. For someone of Stella's class, as long as she understood the principle, it was not a difficult technique to reproduce. Stella carried Ikki past Akaza without him being aware of it.

—And as she went past, she gave a backhand blow that sent his whole pitiful body flying.

"Buhyaaaaaaaaa!?"

Akaza's body was blown away like it had been hit by a truck, and crashing through the blue gate, it bounced over and over like a rubber ball to finally roll onto the ring.

「Whoa! That old guy really flew!」

「What's with that old man? I think I've seen him before.」

「Or should I say, it looks like his back is bent at an outrageous angle, right?」

「And that's some amazing twitching. It makes me feel bad.」

「Is he even alive?」

The outside was becoming slightly noisy, but Stella didn't care. In order to get Ikki examined by a doctor immediately, she turned toward the infirmary. The face of the person she had just sent flying, it didn't leave a trace in her mind.

Part 16

One hour after the end of the match, Touka's consciousness, which had been shattered to pieces by her Device *Narukami* being broken, had gradually returned.

"Have you woken up, Touka?"

"How are you feeling? Does it hurt anywhere?"

She was stretched out on a bed. Utakata and Kanata were nursing her. At this sight, Touka knew.

"I see… I lost, didn't I?"

Her recollection stopped after following through with Raikiri, so Touka didn't remember the instant that she had been defeated. But if she looked at the expressions on her friends' faces, it wasn't hard to guess.

"…Even though I thought my Raikiri was supreme, huh?"

"Nangou-sensei said so too."

"Master said so? He was here?"

"Yep. Right, Kanata?"

"Yes. Because today's match was open to the public. It seems he came to watch."

"He praised it very much, that your Raikiri was the most beautiful to date."

..Is that so?

"If even Master saw it that way, then it couldn't be wrong, I guess."

She had used all of her power. And there was no mistake that she had exceeded Ikki Kurogane. However—

At that instant, Kurogane-kun had become even faster.

Inside that instant, he had changed his own limits. For nothing more than his own victory.

She had also pursued her own goal continuously, but compared to Ikki, she had still been indulgent. The Worst One had always, not just today, been having this kind of hopeless fight. And on each occasion, he had always been changing himself.

…What an amazing person.

For herself to be defeated, in a way it was probably inevitable.

But—that's only true for now.

In Touka hands, there was a satisfactory response from her broken Raikiri remaining. And that response taught her this. Raikiri could still become stronger. What hindered it could be overcome someday. No, she would show that she could overcome it. Before their next fight, absolutely.

She would chase after him. With all her power—because next time, she would be the challenger.

"…Well anyway, Touka."

"Yes?"

Suddenly, Utakata spoke with a self-conscious expression for some reason. What was on his mind? Touka urged him to speak.

"Should we get in touch with everyone at Wakaba House?"

…Oh, that's right.

Now that she thought of it, she remembered they had said they already made the congratulatory banner. She had to properly inform them that she had lost. If even the selection battles had

ended like that, she had to go and tell them.

Utakata was saying that if having her say it herself was too difficult, he would inform them in her place.

"Thanks for thinking about my feelings, but it's fine. I'll tell them properly."

"It's fine not to force yourself, you know?"

But Touka calmly shook her head. She wasn't forcing herself. She had fought with Ikki with all her strength. Touka had drawn as much of what she now had as she could. Raikiri, with even the resolve to kill Ikki, had been a slash that no one who saw it would be embarrassed about. She had nothing to be ashamed of.

"So I'll go home with pride."

And she would tell them.

That she had fought with an amazing knight.

References

1. ↑ *Tanuki*: Japanese raccoon dog, an animal culturally associated with mischief and shapeshifting.
2. ↑ *Otogiri*, 音切: "Sound Cut" (sound as in "noise", not as in "enduring")
3. ↑ *Ittou Rasetsu*, 羅刹: One-Blade Rakshasa. A rakshasa is a demonic being found in Hinduism and Buddhism, known for bestial ferocity and cannibalism. Depending on mythology, rakshasa is considered interchangeable with shura, or is a type of shura.

Epilogue: Crownless Sword King

In the end, Ikki slept for an entire week. Given his fatigue from the inquiry, and poisoning symptoms from the drugs, and the backlash from Ittou Rasetsu added on… well, it might have been expected.

While the person in question slept, the riotous chain of events that started the scandal returned to normal. The King of Vermillion, Stella's father, heard about the outcome of Ikki's battle and the facts leading up to it including information about the Ethics Committee and its underlings, and he had made a declaration of disapproval. Because the king expressed disapproval, it became impossible to silence the information. The king declared "After the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival is over, come to Vermillion. Judgment will be deferred until then" as the decision regarding the current scandal. Since Akaza had lost his standing, there was not a single person questioning Ikki's ethics as a knight.

After everything was settled, one week later—

In the normally seldom-used gymnasium, all the students in the school were gathered. Six representatives had been singled out by the long selection battles. And so the official investiture was performed.

「Now, we will begin the investiture. Those whose names are called, come up to the stage.」

Kurono said so with a far-reaching voice, and read off the names of the representatives one by one.

「Year One A-Rank, Stella Vermillion.」
「Year Three D-Rank, Botan Hagure.」
「Year Three B-Rank, Kanata Toutokubara.」
「Year Three C-Rank, Kikyou Hagure.」
「Year One D-Rank, Nagi Arisuin… is absent due to other business.」

And lastly—

「Year One F-Rank, Ikki Kurogane.」

Ikki's name was called.

"Yes."

Leaving his seat while giving the short answer, he went up on stage via the staircase on the side. And like the four people who had been called earlier, he walked to the board chairman Kurono Shinguuji to accept a medal and certificate.

「Congratulations.」

"Thank you very much."

Bowing, he faced the gathered students like the other four people did, and thus he became one of the representatives as well.

Seeing that Ikki who had been called last had joined the line, Kurono spoke.

「The five people standing here, and Nagi Arisuin who is the sixth, are now officially recognized as our Hagun Academy's representatives at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival!」

At those words, **clap clap clap**, huge applause was sent toward those five people. Everyone was staring straight at Ikki and the other representative contenders.

…Even though he had previously fought with people watching him like this, Ikki who was not used to being the center of attention outside of battle this way felt a little bit uncomfortable. From the beginning, Ikki was the type whose social status would not be noticed by other people, so he was not good with this kind of ceremonial event. If he could, he would leave the stage quickly.

But his hope would be betrayed.

「Now next, the captain of the representative team will be announced. Once the name is called, step forward.」

Kurono called out that name.

「The team captain will be Year One F-Rank Ikki Kurogane.」

"…Eh?"

Ikki became speechless at his own name being given as team captain, and he looked over his shoulder at Kurono without a thought in his head.

"Me, the captain…? Why…?"

Compared to Kanata who on the student council and had real achievements, or Stella who was popular in the news, in what way was Ikki better for the position of team captain, he wondered?

But Kurono retorted to Ikki with an astonished face.

「What are you asking for? Hunter, Runner's High, and Raikiri. With you knocking aside the frontrunners for Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representative here in Hagun one by one, no one is else worthy to be Hagun's team captain. Aren't you going to hurry up and go out there?」

"Ah, y-yes."

Though he couldn't really agree, since for someone like Ikki—who had honestly been living on the fringe of people's notice—to become team captain would surely result only in disorder, Ikki stepped forward reflexively at Kurono's forceful tone. Seeing that, Kurono continued the ceremony.

「Now then, the team captain will be brought the school flag.」

At the same time as those words, a single female student appeared from the side of the stage carrying Hagun's school flag. It was….

"…President Toudou."

…The girl Ikki himself had defeated in the last battle.

"We haven't seen each other since the match, right? I'm glad you're

in good health."

Touka smiled a tiny bit, and lightly raised the school flag she was carrying.

"This is the flag that I, the team captain last year, was entrusted with. I thought I was going to keep it this year too, but I lost to you, Kurogane-kun. So I begged the teachers. I wanted to bestow the flag on you myself."

Hearing those words, Ikki's was at a loss for a reply. It was extremely clear that Touka had already sorted out her feelings, but for Ikki who had been asleep a little while back, it felt like the battle was only yesterday. So to the opponent he had defeated, he didn't know what words he should respond with.

But—even though he didn't know what words to use, Ikki thought that he wanted to give his thanks. The fight had been stained with other people's treachery, but he had stilled challenged this proud knight. Because she had been there, he was able to pull such strength from himself.

"Touka-san. ...I... because I had you as my opponent, I brought out my full strength. Because I wanted to win against you, I could use that much strength. …If you hadn't been the opponent… I would've surely…."

"Kurogane-kun."

But Touka interrupted Ikki's words, and looked at him with an honest, graceful smile.

"Kurogane-kun. winning is the same as having a responsibility. It means you have to inherit the wish of the one who lost. …This flag is filled with the thoughts and hopes of not just the ones who couldn't be a representative, but many more people. I'm not telling you to fight for our sake. But, how should I put it… please take us along with this flag—to the summit of the Seven Stars."

She presented the flag she held to Ikki. Presented with those words and the flag, Ikki understood. He didn't need things like words.

How to repay this girl, and all the knights whose dreams would not come true, there was only one way. The one who won must take responsibility for the hopes of those who lost.

In that case, what was it that he, the one who had won, should do? It wasn't like Ikki didn't know. So he grasped the black flag pole firmly.

"…I promise."

He accepted the flag. At that moment, thunderous applause came from the assembled students.

「Do your best, Captain—!」
「We're always here to cheer you on!」
「You beat the president! You're our representative now!」
「We believe you can take the championship, Ikki-kun!」
「Don't lose~! Crownless Sword King—!」

Cheering voices, yells of blessings, scolding encouragement. Many voices were mixed with the applause, and all of it struck Ikki's body. At that impact, Ikki felt a numbness run through his entire body …and his lips tightened, his face stiffened. Because if he didn't do so… tears would fall.

So Ikki locked his expression and raised the flag in response, then returned to his spot in the line. And he said something in a small voice to Stella who was standing next to him.

"…Stella."

"What?"

"I… speaking honestly, I'm not at all interested in how other people see me. Because I've never gotten a good evaluation, and thought I never would. I always thought it would be fine if no one understood me."

But—

"Being accepted, it feels surprisingly pleasant, doesn't it?"

Whether he was smiling or crying at that moment, Ikki didn't really know. But because Stella was looking at his face and smiling happily, he thought surely he was making a very joyful face.

And so, South Kanto's[1] Hagun Academy decided its representative contenders for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

North Kanto's Donrou Academy. Tohoku's Kyomon Academy. Tokkaido's Rokuzon Academy. Kyushu, Okinawa's Bunkyoku Academy. China and Shikoku's Rentei Academy. And—continuing to advance for the last twenty years, Japan's strongest school that had monopolized the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival winner's podium for each of the last five years, as well as the world-leading school of champions, Central Kinki's Bukyoku Academy. Each of them had publicly and thrillingly revealed their representatives.

The actors had appeared.

Kyomon's *Icy Laughter*, Mikoto Tsuruya.
Rokuzon's *Panzer Grizzly*, Renji Kaga.
Donrou's *Sword Eater*, Kuraudo Kurashiki.
And—the previous Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival champion, *Seven Stars Sword King* Yuudai Moroboshi.

Every one of them, a famous warrior. Right now, Ikki Kurogane was turning towards them who the whole country was waiting for.

The summit of the Seven Stars. To stand at that summit. And for his strongest, most beloved rival. To fulfill his promise to the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion.

His story—was advancing to the national stage!

※ ※ ※

Somewhere else, at the time Hagun Academy's investiture was being carried out—

Under a deserted highway overpass—

「Ha ha ha, then Hagun's roster has also been set, I see. It's extremely unexpected that Raikiri, Runner's High, and that Lorelei will not be there, but...」

"It can't be helped. Because those two people had poor luck in the lottery."

「Well, luck is a kind of strength. If they were defeated in a lottery, they were only that level of knight. —And, well if the same happened to Ouma-kun, I don't think I'd say the same.」

"It doesn't matter, you know."

「So cold-hearted, I see. Well, that's fine. I believe everything has been prepared over there?」

"Yes, there are no problems. Lorelei being defeated was beyond expectations, but… it won't hinder the plan. —She can be done in at any time."

「Ha ha ha. The current master of assassination. Your skill is unquestionable. As expected for our Black Assassin who cleared the Killing House's highest record score. —No, right now, you're the Black Sonia, right? Our comrade, Arisuin.」

Arisuin's visage at that moment did not fit the friendly one he showed every day to Ikki and the others. It was a cold expression. It did not appear to be an expression a person with human emotions would wear, an appearance like glasswork. At a glance, one would probably mistake him for another person.

But as he was now, he had a dangerous beauty that can't be called violent.

「In any case, let's say that the preparations for the eve of the Festival have been done.」

While revealing a laugh that scoffed at everything in the world, the person on the other end of the phone call that Arisuin was making, which Arisuin was making with a student datapad different from that of Hagun, coughed with a voice in some kind of ecstasy.

「The actors are all present—everyone thinks so, yes? But that's not quite true. The leading actor hasn't entered the stage yet. No one even knows that the leading actor exists. So let's inform them. To enter the stage from below the curtain, and strike the faces of those pretentious enough to think themselves the leading actor, and reveal it all to the audience. --The leading actor of this Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival will be us, Akatsuki.」

The stage was changing to the whole country, and the story was starting to move. As if creeping near—it brought along an ominous, despicable sound.

References

1. ↑ *Kanto*: The geographical region of Japan which includes Tokyo. The terms Tohoku, Tokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku, and Kinki which follow are all Japanese regions.

Afterword

Thank you very much for subscribing to the third volume of *Rakudai Kishi no Eiyuutan*. This is the author, Rika Misora.

The third volume was the climax of the school arc. As the author, I was also getting through it with high tension. Did everyone have fun? For the author to call the climax of a chapter exciting, that would be singing one's own praises nowadays. So for that reason, I think it would be good if all the readers found the volume interesting.

Now, I'm changing the conversation, but the second volume of *Rakudai Kishi no Eiyuutan* series has sold more a hundred thousand copies. First of all, I would like to give my thanks to the readers for that here. For your subscriptions and support, I truly thank you! Thanks to you, this series also safely completed its school arc, and can continue on to the following nation arc. This is also solely thanks to everyone's support.

In the fourth volume, from the widely-known champion to the evil presence that has not entered front stage yet, all sorts of people aiming for the Seven Stars will appear simultaneously. Since the author thinks there will be stronger enemies and fiercer battles than what has come up to now, by all means please continue to support this series!

Now I'd like to take this opportunity to give my gratitude to the people who've collaborated in making this book.

Won-san, thank you for the always, always wonderful illustrations. I'm truly thankful for responding to my various requests, even in the middle of a tight schedule. Especially illustration with the increasing exposure, it had my mouth watering. The special right to appreciate that before anyone else belongs to the author! (Haha.) I'm always, always looking forward to it.

And Kobara-san the editor, and everyone in the editorial

department who put the work together, thank you very much as always.

And lastly, to everyone who read this book, I thank you again.

Well then, let's all meet in the fourth volume!